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- ☑ Run a portable Windows 11
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From the Editor

I love that in the middle of an AI revolution the humble USB stick is as popular as ever. They remain brilliantly simple devices – and are getting bigger (in capacity) and smaller (in actual size) all the time.

My first USB stick was a mere 8MB, but that seemed big enough in 2001 when all I wanted to store were Word documents. The one I have in my pocket right now is 8,000 times bigger (64GB) and home to several hours of family videos.

In his Cover Feature Robert Irvine reveals fantastic new ways you can maximise that storage – and in doing so reveals how USB sticks have moved with the times. You can now use them to run the latest operating systems (Windows 11, Linux), update hundreds of programs, record live TV and stream video around your home.

And in a sign USB sticks are ready for the next leap forward, you can even run AI chatbots from them. They'll be essential for years yet.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

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1,800 per cent
Increase in Proton VPN sign-ups following UK's age-check porn laws – *p7*

360 degrees
Flexibility of the hinge on Dell's 14 Plus 2-in-1 laptop – *p23*

HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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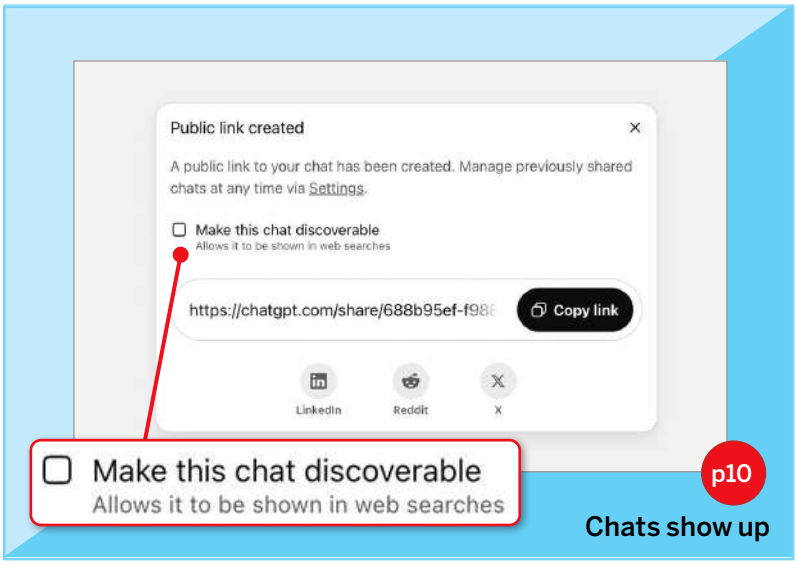
Public link created
A public link to your chat has been created. Manage previously shared chats at any time via Settings.
Make this chat discoverable
Allows it to be shown in web searches
https://chatgpt.com/share/688b95ef-f98
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DOWNLOAD
Raspberry Pi 2/3/4/Zero 2
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Please use the spacebar to select the software you wish to install. Then press ENTER/RETURN or select <Confirm> to confirm.
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- Software and usage details: https://dietpi.com/docs/software/
<Confirm>
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Freely TV box confirmed – but not on Amazon or Roku

Freely has confirmed it will launch a streaming box later this year, but it will be made by French firm Netgem and so won't appear as an app on Amazon Fire TV Sticks or Roku players.

WHAT WE THINK

We're pleased a Freely box is coming, but it's one more device viewers shouldn't have to buy. What they (and we) really want is a Freely app that works on all the devices they already own: Fire TV Sticks, Roku players, Apple TV boxes and so on. That said, since March anyone with a Fire TV Stick has been able to watch live BBC. They're going to take a lot of persuading to buy a Freely box now. Also, it feels underwhelming to confirm the box with so few details (price? Launch date?). We don't even know what it's called yet!

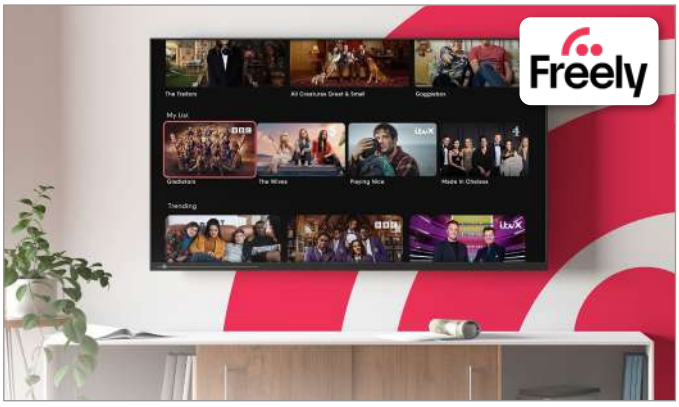
It means you'll be able to watch Freely channels by plugging the box into any smart TV, making it available to millions of existing TV owners who don't want to buy a new set.

You won't need to pay for a Freely subscription, but you will need a TV licence to watch live content.

Currently Freely, which is the long-term replacement for Freeview, is available only on new TVs (see full range at www.snipca.com/55770), slowing its adoption with viewers.

Netgem makes streaming boxes that include Freeview Play. Its most popular model is the NetBox 4K (£149 from www.snipca.com/55768), which also has Amazon Prime Video, Discovery+ Premium, YouTube and other channels.

Its boxes have also been offered by internet providers including TalkTalk and Vodafone as the TV box in broadband packages.



However, Netgem's boxes have been criticised for being slow to respond to remote controls. They also lack Apple TV+ and Disney+, offering far less choice than rival devices made by Amazon, Apple, Roku and Google.

40 live channels but no recording

The box, yet to be named, has all the key Freely features already available on TVs. These include the mini-guide for switching between channels, pausing and restarting live TV, and 'My List' for saving shows across different channels.

Everyone TV, the organisation that runs Freely, described it as a "plug-in and stream" box, adding that it provides access to more than 40 live UK channels. It will be updated automatically with features and channels.

However, it didn't say whether the box will contain any other apps. Nor did it reveal a photo, confirm how much it would cost or indicate when it would be on sale.

Unlike current Netgem boxes, it won't let you record using external USB drives or hard drives.

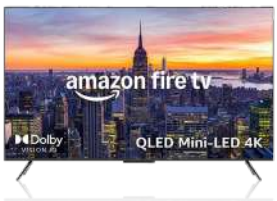
The box will be a streaming-only device, with no port for an aerial. This differs from current Freely TVs and Freeview Play boxes, which let you add channels that also broadcast to an aerial. Read more on Everyone TV's site: www.snipca.com/55767.

OUR THREE FAVOURITE FREELY TELEVISIONS

BUDGET
Bush 43UT24SB
£179 from www.snipca.com/53637

MID-RANGE
Hisense 50U6NQTUK
£359 from www.snipca.com/51850

PREMIUM
Amazon Fire TV Omni Mini-LED
£650 from www.snipca.com/55772



You'll like this...
AI-powered cameras are being used to tackle fly tipping (www.snipca.com/55773)

but not this...
Mum was scammed after AI cloned daughter's voice (www.snipca.com/55774)

BT's mid-contract price hikes to increase in 2026

BT is increasing its mid-contract price hikes from £3 to £4 a month. This means new broadband customers will be hit with a £4 price rise on 31 March 2026.

The rise also applies to customers who use a BT hub to get 4G and 5G broadband. However, customers who signed up before 31 July will get the current £3 increase until their contract expires.

In 2025 telecoms regulator Ofcom ordered internet providers to state mid-contract price rises in pounds and pence. Previously most companies tied price rises to the rate of inflation plus an arbitrary amount – usually 3.5 per cent.

Ofcom said the rules would make price rises easier to understand, but it didn't guarantee the increases would be smaller as a percentage.

Most providers including BT responded by increasing their prices by £3 in April 2025.

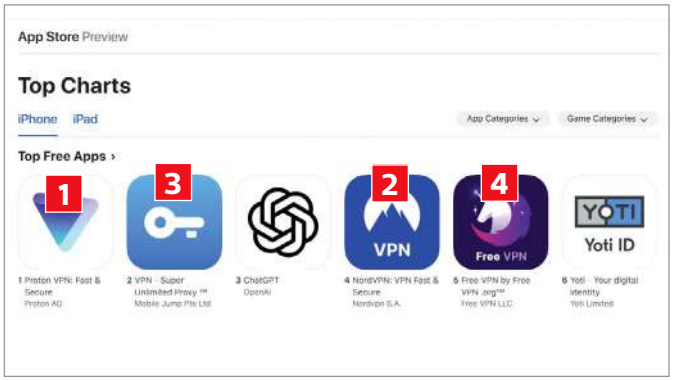
BT has also announced increases for EE's mobile services to start on 1 March 2026. Both the Flex Pay airtime and SIM-only plans go up by £2.50, while bundled phone and airtime plans increase by £4.

Anything not included in your package such as calls and texts will increase by £5.

1.1 MILLION CUSTOMERS GET BT REFUND

BT has refunded £18m to over 1.1 million customers after Ofcom ruled it hadn't given clear details about contract terms, including duration, pricing and early exit fees. As a result, customers were wrongly charged exit fees. BT also donated £440,000 to 17 charities where refunds were not possible. Read more at www.snipca.com/55746.

VPNs top app charts as users beat porn age block



VPNs have become the most popular free apps in the UK as people seek ways to bypass new laws that force porn sites to verify users are over 18.

From 25 July sites providing access to sexually explicit content have had to use a "robust" age-check system such as analysing selfies to estimate age, or asking users to upload ID.

But users can get around this by installing VPNs that disguise their location, tricking porn sites into thinking they're based outside the UK and therefore don't need to prove their age.

The rules, which also cover content promoting self-harm, suicide and eating disorders, are part of the Online Safety Act.

Within days of the rules being implemented four of the top five free apps on Apple's store were VPNs (www.snipca.com/55747).

The most popular was Proton (1 in our screenshot above), which claimed it saw a 1,800 per cent spike in people signing up.

Proton is a *Computeractive* favourite and safe to use, as is NordVPN 2. We haven't tested the other two VPNs 3 and 4, but both get poor reviews.

Campaigners for children's safety online said it's worrying how easy it is for kids to get around the law by using VPNs.

However, Ofcom says porn sites aren't allowed to instruct or encourage users to use VPNs in this way.

• **"Governments might force VPNs to block porn sites" – Letters, page 12**

IN BRIEF

BUY GIFFGAFF DATA ADD-ONS ABROAD

Giffgaff has launched new 'add-ons' that boost your phone data when you hit your initial limit (up to 5GB) while roaming abroad. They're available in packets of 1GB, 5GB and 10GB and in 42 destinations – 38 of which are in the EU. Prices vary by country and the data lasts for 30 days. For details visit www.snipca.com/55742.

TALKTALK AXES EMAIL FOR EX CUSTOMERS

TalkTalk is turning off its free email services for former broadband customers using addresses that include @talktalk.net, @lineone.net, @tiscali.co.uk, @tinyworld.co.uk and @pipex.com. The company stopped users sending emails through its service on 28 July, and from 8 September they'll no longer be able to log into their account unless they sign up for the paid service. TalkTalk will permanently close all legacy accounts on 31 October – see www.snipca.com/55743.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

When Chinese firm Hengbot introduced its robot dog Sirius to a real puppy, it hoped for a magical encounter between real and robot canine. Instead, the pooch looked bemused and ignored its mechanical cousin (see www.snipca.com/55745). Hengbot claims its "trainable" dogs will transform the pet industry. More chance of a chihuahua herding wildebeest.

IN BRIEF

AMAZON RELEASES 16GB COLOUR KINDLE

Amazon has released a 16GB version of its colour ebook reader, the Colorsoft. It costs £239.99 (www.snipca.com/55704, pictured), £30 less than last year's 32GB version (www.snipca.com/55705), although it lacks that version's wireless charging and auto-adjusting light sensor. There's also a £259.99 Kids edition (www.snipca.com/55706) which comes with one year of ebooks and audiobooks from Amazon Kids+.

PROTON LAUNCHES 'PRIVATE' AI CHATBOT

Swiss firm Proton has launched an AI chatbot called Lumo that encrypts chats and doesn't log them on its servers. You can save chats, but Proton will never be able to see them. Read more at www.snipca.com/55707 and use Lumo at www.snipca.com/55708. Buy a back issue of our 'Ditch Google for Proton' feature at www.snipca.com/55740.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

This isn't a pop group, it's an "artistic provocation". They're called The Velvet Sundown, their music is AI generated, and they've been a hit on Spotify, with over 1.5 million listeners (www.snipca.com/55709). Its creators say it aims to "challenge the future of music" in the AI era. Maybe. Or is it about making money?

New WhatsApp for PC to be slower and use more RAM

WhatsApp is replacing its Windows app with a slower version that runs more like a website.

Instead of a Windows program designed specifically for your PC, it's being built using a 'web wrapper'.

This means it'll run inside a simple browser window that's made to look like a desktop program.

Meta, which owns WhatsApp, didn't explain why it's making the change, but it's probably so that different versions of the app look and work the same across all devices – saving the company money.

However, apps in web wrappers use more RAM and are slower because they have to run a full browser engine inside an app window.

Tests show that the new app uses 30 per cent more PC RAM than the previous version.

It also has a more basic Settings section with fewer features, while notifications are likely to be less reliable because it ditches Windows' built-in notification system, relying instead on browser-style alerts.

The new version is in the beta release of WhatsApp, available from the Microsoft Store (www.snipca.com/55711, pictured). Unless Meta backtracks, the technology will be added to the full version soon.

In May Meta finally announced plans to release WhatsApp for the iPad (www.snipca.com/55712), 15 years after it first appeared on phones.

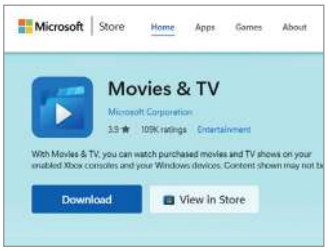
It supports iPadOS, which is Apple's operating system for iPads. This means it will work with features exclusive to iPadOS, including Split View, Slide Over and Stage Manager.

Microsoft stops selling TV and films

Microsoft has stopped selling TV and film downloads through its Store on Windows and Xbox, but you can continue to watch any you've already bought.

Purchases ceased on 25 July. You can play content you previously downloaded by opening the 'Films & TV' app – or 'Movies & TV' if you're using the US language settings. Download it from www.snipca.com/55714 (pictured) on your computer or Xbox. These will continue to be in HD max resolution.

You won't however be able to move your content to another service, or get refunds for anything you've bought.



The closure has been anticipated since Microsoft scrapped Groove Music in 2017. It first offered films and TV in 2006 through the Zune Marketplace, before replacing it in 2012 with Xbox Video.

That in turn was replaced by the Movies & TV page in the Store in 2015.

Microsoft has published an FAQ on the closure (www.snipca.com/55713), where it recommends users buy content on the Xbox and Windows stores from "other entertainment services that offer the latest home entertainment releases", such as Amazon Prime Video and Apple TV.

The company says it will continue to offer support for any content you've bought – visit its support site at www.snipca.com/55715.

Force YouTube to promote BBC and ITV videos Ofcom says

YouTube should be forced to make it easier for viewers to find videos by the BBC, ITV and Channels 4 and 5 to help keep public-service broadcasting alive, Ofcom says.

The regulator says public broadcasting is "endangered" and has published a "six-point action plan" to ensure its future.

It called for YouTube and public service broadcasters to "work urgently" so content is more prominent in menus.

Ofcom said this was "particularly important" for news and children's content, adding there's "a strong case for Government to legislate to enable the change".

Research shows that children spend much more time watching YouTube than all of the public-service broadcasters combined. Ofcom said "the future of public service media is at risk" if young viewers don't start watching their content.

Only adults aged 35 and older are most likely to turn to BBC One when looking for things to watch. Netflix is the most popular service for 16 to 34-year-olds, while younger children are most likely to watch YouTube.

Ofcom found that only about 20 per cent of videos watched on YouTube in the UK are actually made in the UK.

As part of its plan of action Ofcom also asked the Government for "urgent clarity" by early 2026 on the future of Freeview.

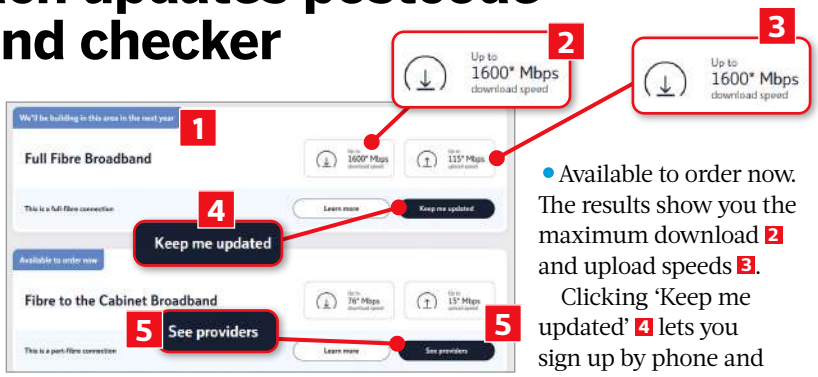
A YouTube spokeswoman told BBC News it was "proud" of its "relationship with British broadcasters" and was "committed to ensuring that they thrive in the digital era".

Read Ofcom's plan of action at www.snipca.com/55669.

Should YouTube be forced to promote BBC and ITV videos? Let us know: letters@comuteractive.co.uk

Openreach updates postcode broadband checker

Openreach has updated its Fibre Checker tool to give a clearer picture of broadband availability in your area.



When you type your postcode at www.snipca.com/55664 you'll now get one of six responses:

- We have no plans to build Full Fibre to this property yet.
- We're planning to build in this area.
- We'll be building in this area in the next year (1 in our screenshot).
- We're building in this area now.
- Available to order soon.
- Available to order now.

The results show you the maximum download 2 and upload speeds 3.

Clicking 'Keep me updated' 4 lets you sign up by phone and email to receive updates from Openreach.

If broadband is available in your area you'll see the option to 'See providers' 5.

You might need to clear your browser's cache to see updated results.

Openreach's full-fibre network currently covers over 19 million UK premises and they're on target to reach 25 million by the end of 2026.

It aims to reach up to 30 million by the end of 2030 at a cost of around £15bn.

COPPER SWITCHED OFF IN 137 MORE AREAS

Openreach has also announced the next batch of areas where it'll turn off copper cables. It affects 137 exchanges in locations including Brecon, Chelmsford, Pernrith, Tyrone and Worcester, and covers 854,000 homes and businesses. See the full list by scrolling down at www.snipca.com/55672.

IN BRIEF

GET EXTRA AUDIOBOOK HOURS ON SPOTIFY

Spotify has launched Audiobooks+, giving Premium Individual subscribers an extra 15 hours of audiobooks per month. It's also available to Family and Plan Duo plan managers, and costs £8.99 a month on top of existing subscriptions. Extra members on family plans can get 15 monthly hours as part of the 'Audiobooks+ for Plan Members' package, which costs £8.99 per person. Visit Spotify's site for details: www.snipca.com/55668.

BRAVE BROWSER BLOCKS WINDOWS RECALL

The latest version of the Brave browser (1.81) blocks Windows Recall, a tool on Copilot+ PCs that takes screenshots of your computer to help you search for things you were working on. Brave said Recall could be a privacy risk and so prevents it taking screen grabs of what you do online, though you can switch it back on – for more information visit www.snipca.com/55671.

EE'S BRINGING 5G TO 38 NEW AREAS

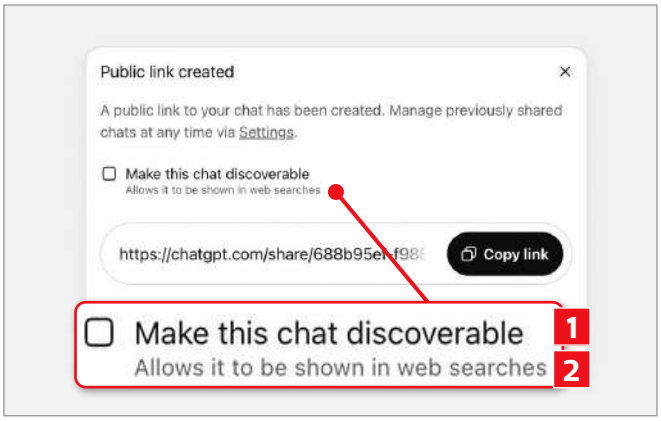
EE's 5G network will be live in 38 new towns and cities by the end of August, including Aberdeen, Canterbury, Derby, Halifax, Ipswich and Wrexham. It's the UK's only standalone 5G network, which means it doesn't rely on older 4G infrastructure, making it faster and more reliable. See every location at www.snipca.com/55667.

Can strangers see your ChatGPT chats on Google?

OpenAI has admitted to a major privacy blunder

"People talk about the most personal s**t in their lives to ChatGPT. People use it – young people, especially, use it – as a therapist, a life coach; having these relationship problems and [asking] 'what should I do?'"

That was OpenAI boss Sam Altman talking on 23 July on the *This Past Weekend* podcast (www.snipca.com/55792). It was the worst timing possible because just days later the Dutch researcher and journalist Henk van Ess found that users' private chats with ChatGPT were appearing in Google's search results. Few people would use ChatGPT as a therapist or life coach – or indeed as anything else – if they thought complete strangers would be able to find these chats online.


Public link created
A public link to your chat has been created. Manage previously shared chats at any time via Settings.
Make this chat discoverable
Allows it to be shown in web searches
https://chatgpt.com/share/688b95e
Copy link
Make this chat discoverable
Allows it to be shown in web searches
1
2

Other chats seemed to be doctors and lawyers asking for professional advice, and school pupils asking ChatGPT to write their essays. More shockingly, one user was trying to persuade the chatbot to generate sexually explicit images of children. The conversations are anonymous but can include personal information, sometimes in documents the user uploads.

> "Chats discussed insider-trading plans, admissions of fraud and attempts to organise a cyber-attack against Hamas"

He said he found more than 500 conversations on Google, while thousands more had been archived on other websites, forums and online databases that keep historical records.

These weren't innocuous chats about the best restaurants in St Ives or where to visit in Paris. They involved discussion of insider-trading plans and admissions of fraud, as well as attempts to organise a cyber-attack against Hamas.

The researchers said the chats had appeared online because the users had created a hyperlink to share them. You do this by clicking Share at the top right followed by 'Create link'. But users would have only wanted to share these links with friends or colleagues by email or text. They didn't expect them to be lying exposed in Google's search results.

The problem is those hyperlinks are public URLs. Anyone with the link can view the chat. Worse, search engines can index the chats, which means they appear in search results. Mr van Ess said 110,000 conversations can be found on the Wayback Machine (https://web.archive.org), a tool from the Internet Archive that stores old web pages.

However, merely sharing the link wasn't enough to make the chat searchable online. The user had to also click the 'Make this chat discoverable' option (1 in our screenshot) – but most people would have thought this meant the chat would be discoverable only by those they were sending it to.

What it actually did was allow Google and other search engines to index it. ChatGPT showed small print confirming chats could appear in web searches 2, but many users would have missed it, or not understood its significance.

In short, then, it was a massive privacy blunder by OpenAI. It instantly realised this and removed the 'Make this chat discoverable' box within 48 hours of the scandal breaking. Dane Stuckey, OpenAI's chief information security officer, said: "Ultimately, we think this feature introduced too many opportunities for folks to accidentally share things they didn't intend to."

He also tried to limit the damage by calling the option a "short-lived experiment", though it's more likely OpenAI was simply caught out. This has echoes of all the privacy oversights most tech giants – particularly Facebook and Google – have been guilty of in the past.

OpenAI will now work with Google to remove the chats from search results, but this debacle is a reminder that you should be careful what you discuss with ChatGPT. And while sharing your chats is now safer, only do it if you trust the person you're sharing with.

THE FACTS

- Thousands of ChatGPT chats were made available for anyone to find by searching online.
- They were exposed when ChatGPT users chose to share their chats with others and selected the option to 'Make this chat discoverable'.
- OpenAI called it a "short-lived experiment" and has now scrapped the option, but the chats remain on Google.

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

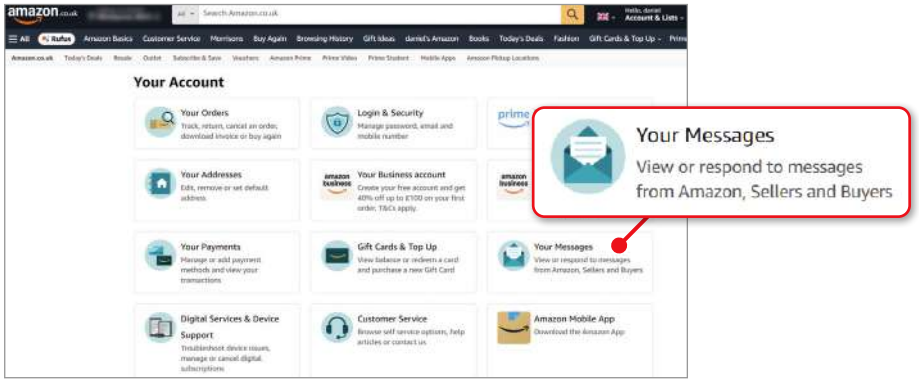
WATCH OUT FOR...

‘Cancel subscription’ Amazon Prime emails

What’s the threat?

Amazon has warned all 200 million Prime subscribers that scammers are sending emails claiming their subscription will automatically renew at a price they weren’t expecting. These emails might include personal information obtained from other sources to appear legitimate.

They may also include a ‘cancel subscription’ button that leads to a fake Amazon login page. If you log in there, the scammers will be able to use your details to log into your Amazon account and change the delivery address to their own. They can then make purchases that take money from your bank account but send the item to their home.



How can you stay safe?

Amazon will never send emails with a button or link asking you to cancel your subscription. Legitimate Amazon emails usually direct you to your official Amazon account page, where you can manage subscriptions securely after logging in. They come from email addresses ending with **@amazon.co.uk** or **@amazon.com**.

All genuine Amazon emails are saved in your Message Centre, so you can check there. To do so, sign into Amazon, click ‘Account & Lists’ at the top-right corner followed by Your Account, then click ‘Your Messages’ (see screenshot).

Note that these scams increased after Amazon’s Prime Day sales ended (8-11 July), not *during* as you might expect. This is because after a major sales event like Prime Day, millions of people are expecting order confirmations and delivery updates.

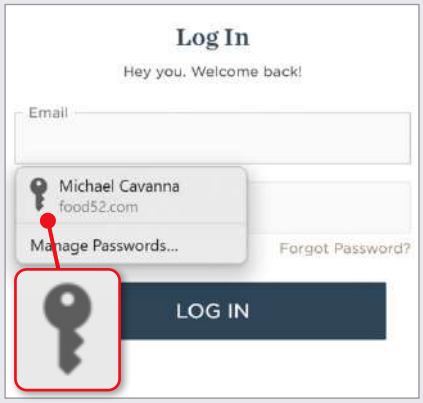
Scammers exploit this by sending fake versions of these legitimate emails, knowing their malicious message is more likely to blend in with genuine communications.

New tools | Use iCloud Passwords in Firefox

Apple now lets you use its iCloud Passwords browser extension in Firefox. This lets you log into websites in Firefox on your Windows PC using passwords saved on your iPhone (see screenshot – the key icon shows that it’s iCloud). It can also generate two-factor authentication (2FA) codes, which you can set up by right-clicking a QR code.

It’s part of Apple’s broader push to make its iCloud Keychain – the tool that stores your logins and passwords across iPhones, iPads and Macs – available to Windows as well. Previously, the extension worked only on Chromium browsers such as Chrome and Edge.

There’s a catch though: it only works in Windows 11. And with Microsoft ending support for Windows 10 in October it’s unlikely Apple will ever make it work with that operating system.



You can install the extension from Mozilla’s Add-ons store: www.snipca.com/55648. For help on setting up Keychain follow Apple’s instructions at www.snipca.com/55652.

ScamWatch
Readers warn readers

Admiral ‘car emergency kit’

I’ve read in *Computeractive* about scams offering ‘emergency car kits’ that impersonated the AA and BP. I’ve not received those, but in July I did get an email supposedly from Admiral insurance saying I could claim a free kit by answering a survey about my “experience” with the company. I’ve never actually used Admiral for my insurance, so it wasn’t hard to dismiss the email as a scam. There’s a yellow button at the bottom saying ‘Get It Now!’. The logo at the top appears to be the genuine Admiral one, but despite this it’s a tacky email that feels fake.

Frank Symes

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

Will Microsoft make Windows 10 self-destruct?

I was exploring some obscure tech forums recently where you can read some highly speculative theories about what companies are secretly planning to do. Many of them have turned out to be true in the past, such as firms backtracking on "promises" not to charge for certain features, or scrapping support for a product after previously vowing it would be covered for a lifetime. It's made me incredibly suspicious of the motives of companies like Netflix, Amazon, Apple, Google and Microsoft.

Talking of the latter, one theory flying around the internet is that Windows 10 has a built-in self-destruct option – called a 'kill switch' – that Microsoft can activate in an instant to stop people using it. Those who believe this claim Microsoft will use this option soon when they realise not enough people have upgraded to Windows 11. I don't believe a word Microsoft says, but this feels too cynical – even for them! Surely it can't be true?

Gary Parsons

CA SAYS **Gary's instinct is correct – Microsoft hasn't built a kill switch into Windows 10. Tech companies have backtracked on countless promises and played dirty tricks that have dented public trust, but Microsoft wouldn't get away with turning off Windows 10 at the touch of a button. Technically it's just about possible, but it would cause massive chaos and lead to explosive legal action. The company's reputation would never recover.**

Of course, some people regard the end of support on 14 October as a less drastic type of kill switch. Microsoft wants you to upgrade to Windows 11, but there are plenty of other options. We'll explain them all in our special 'Windows 10 Survival Guide' issue – out on 10 September.

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Governments might force VPNs to block porn sites

John Miller is no doubt right that under-18s will use VPNs to get around the age checks for porn sites (Letters, Issue 715), but that's not a convincing argument against age checks themselves. He says it's like a modern equivalent of using false ID in pubs to prove you're 18, and that's a fair point too. But at least these age checks introduce some practical barriers to viewing what should be off limits for children. We should support every layer of hassle that makes it harder for kids to stumble upon adult content.

Also, if VPN use soars after the age checks come in, then expect calls for them to block URLs for porn sites – or for VPNs to also be restricted to over 18s. John Miller thinks VPN owners will welcome the new age checks because it'll lead to a boom in people using them. But perhaps these VPN companies should be careful what they wish for. Governments are finally waking up to the harm caused by giving kids unfiltered access to the internet and passing laws to control VPNs could be next on their agenda.

Norman Kirk

Baffling that Microsoft Authenticator is still on by default

As an exercise in baffling the general user, Microsoft's decision to stop their Authenticator app storing passwords takes some beating. Instead of disabling this feature, it's still there – and you have to switch it off yourself in the app (the 'Set as Auto-fill provider' option). This becomes apparent when trying to use one of the many parking apps where Authenticator pops up when trying to pay. But if you use it, it doesn't work – just what you don't need when trying to pay in bright sunlight.

PW Bradshaw

CA SAYS **We agree completely. Microsoft's decision to axe auto-filling of passwords in Authenticator but leaving it turned on by default is bewildering. Microsoft wants you to use Authenticator only for generating two-factor authentication codes while saving passwords in Edge, but that's a hassle you can do without. Instead, use a password manager with a built-in authenticator, such as Bitwarden Premium (www.snipca.com/55683). It stores both passwords and 2FA codes, as well as passkeys. It costs $10 (about £7.40) a year, but we think that's excellent value.**

Adverts coming to Glastonbury TV coverage

On the subject of adverts on streaming networks, I've just read about the forthcoming bidding war over

What's the Issue...?

When did you write about life-saving apps such as What3words and OS Locate?

Colin Edwards

CA SAYS **In Issue 695, page 60.**

I remember reading your 'five golden rules of buying a TV' a while back. They'll prove handy now I need a new TV. Which issue was that?

Barry Goodman

CA SAYS **Issue 694, page 51. Read it and the feature above on our 2024 Back Issue Stick: www.snipca.com/53180.**

I've got loads of old SIM cards to get rid of. Didn't you explain how to do this recently in answer to a reader's problem?

Pat Cartwright

CA SAYS **Yes, in Issue 707, page 64. Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/55607.**

the Glastonbury festival. Apparently YouTube and Amazon Music are considering paying for the rights when the BBC's contract expires – around 2027. That would mean the BBC's advert-free coverage of the festival over the radio and TV might be over. Those streaming giants would saturate the weekend coverage with adverts unless you pay to remove them. I don't think they can cover all the stages like the BBC does at the moment, so Glastonbury fans should beware. Let's see who has the most money to pull it off.

Alan Merser

ChatGPT's waffle costs electricity too

I was fascinated by Kevin Mellor's Star Letter in Issue 714 ('Being polite to ChatGPT is like saying please to your toaster'). He's right, of course, that the chatbot has "absolutely no humanity", but recently I had a rather tricky personal problem that I shared with it and was amazed at the apparent insight and sensitivity it displayed and which helped me a great deal.

I felt quite moved by it and told it that I knew it made no sense to say 'Thank you' to a machine but, well, I felt I just simply had to – so I did. I was somewhat amused by its response, saying it completely understood how I felt and was glad to have been of assistance.

Some people say typing 'please' and 'thank you' uses unnecessary electricity. However, when I ask it a simple question, it usually starts by complimenting me on a thoughtful and insightful question. It then tells me how it analysed my query, before presenting me with possible answers. It discards some of these as wrong or inappropriate and finally sums everything up in an ordered list of main points. All of that for a simple enquiry when all I wanted was a correspondingly simple answer! How much unnecessary electricity does all that use, I wonder?

Alan Turk

Customize ChatGPT
Introduce yourself to get better, more personalized responses
What should ChatGPT call you?
Nickname
What do you
Interior de
What traits should ChatGPT have?
Be brief and to the point unless I ask for more
What traits should ChatGPT have?
Be brief and to the point unless I ask for more

STAR LETTER

Don't block Govt's phone alert – it prepared me for storms

Issue 715's 'Question of the Fortnight' (pictured) about the forthcoming test alarm being sent by the Government gave instructions for configuring your phone so it doesn't receive the alert. I believe there are good reasons why some vulnerable people would want to do this – if they use a 'secret' phone at home, for example. But my own personal experience shows how these alerts can be useful even if you think they'll never apply to you.

Question of the Fortnight

Will your phone get the Govt's emergency alert?

Millions of devices missed out when it was last sent in 2023

I was one of the Three customers who didn't receive the test in 2023. Annoyed by this, I switched to O2. I live in an area of Somerset prone to severe flooding, so welcomed a warning system. It proved worthwhile last December when Storm Darragh hit. I knew strong winds were coming, but the 'Red' alert nudged me into action.

I took precautions to minimise damage in our garden and made sure we had a backup power supply. It was a good job I did because we had no electricity for 36 hours after Darragh flattened several power cables nearby. I was also able to warn several elderly neighbours who don't have smartphones and may have missed the TV forecasts.

There's something about a sudden alert on your phone that focuses the mind more than watching a TV forecast predicting severe weather. It's worthwhile for the Government to test them and to pressure networks to make sure everyone can receive them. The tricky question is how often to test them. If they do it too often the public will accuse them of crying wolf.

Jean Watkins

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

CA SAYS **ChatGPT is designed to sound warm and helpful, even if it's just a machine. But Alan has spotted one of its more frustrating habits: answering a quick question with a five-course meal of analysis, disclaimers and bullet points.**

The good news is you can rein it in by asking it to 'Keep it brief' or 'Answer in two sentences'. You can even make this your default. Click your name at the bottom left followed by 'Customize ChatGPT'. Under 'What traits should ChatGPT have?', type something like 'Be brief and to the point unless I ask for more' (see screenshot left), then click Save at the bottom. That should keep the waffle to a minimum – and save some electricity, too.

Amazon driver 'stole my AirPods'

I had a related incident to Frank Griffiths ('Amazon driver drove off without delivering my item', Letters, Issue 711). I ordered a pair of AirPods Pro. When the driver arrived he knocked on the door – ignoring our video doorbell as I discovered later. I gave him the code and he disappeared quickly.

I went to the kitchen and opened the box, only to find nothing inside. On closer inspection I found that a corner of the box had been carefully torn open, presumably so the contents could be removed without damaging the appearance of the box. I immediately told Amazon and they refunded me the money within an hour. I then bought a replacement from the Apple store.

I had no video of the driver and no way to send Amazon a photo of the box. In future I will carefully examine the box before parting with the code. I can't fault Amazon's refund policy but how many Amazon drivers are doing this? Do they ever get caught?

Chris Andrews

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

Why is Honor refusing discount sent after purchase?

LEAD CASE

Q In June I bought an Honor MagicPad 2 Android tablet, paying £399.99. After ordering online I noticed that Honor had sent me a code for a five-per-cent discount. I immediately sent two emails to Honor requesting they apply this discount to my order. I repeated the request the following day, and have sent six more emails, but Honor refuses to give me the discount. What should I do now?

Richard Gant

A There's not a lot Richard can do because Honor hasn't acted illegally. It didn't offer the discount *before* the purchase, so it doesn't have to honour it. It can simply ignore any discounts applied after purchase. Indeed, it's not uncommon for retailers to send a discount code shortly after a purchase to encourage the customer to buy something else.

However, we suspect something went wrong during the transaction, and Honor's customer service has been appalling. We'll ask Honor whether it had intended to offer Richard the discount during the purchase but mistakenly sent it after. If so, we'll ask it to refund him as a goodwill gesture. It's not a lot (£20), but it would be the decent thing to do.

The situation would be more serious if Honor had advertised the discount in the original listing. If so, under the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act (DMCCA) – which in April superseded the Unfair Trading Regulations (2008) – Richard would be legally entitled to the discount. We'll look into this.

Of course, Richard could have cancelled the order immediately and placed a new one using the discount code. If Honor had declined to cancel the order and had attempted delivery, Richard would've had the right to refuse it.

CASE ONGOING

Why didn't ISP place router where I wanted?

Q I recently switched internet providers, but when the engineers came they wouldn't put the router where I wanted it. I can connect my laptop if I'm near the router, but I can't connect devices further away, including my PC and TV. Is this covered by Ofcom's scheme for automatic compensation (www.snipca.com/55703)?

Paul Hogarth

A No it's not. That's because Paul's provider did install broadband, and he does have an internet connection. However, we think this is poor customer service.

He told the engineers where he wanted the router, but they gave vague reasons why it wasn't possible. They should at least have given him a full explanation. Colin said they didn't even check that the service was working before they left.

We'll ask the provider why its engineers couldn't place the router where Colin wanted it. If we're not convinced by its answer, we'll ask it to move the router. We'll also ask Ofcom for clarification on compensation if a service is installed but not to the customer's satisfaction.

CASE ONGOING

LEGAL UPDATE

New law means fewer 'cookie consent' pop-ups

You'll hopefully be pestered by fewer 'cookie consent' pop-ups now that the Data (Use and Access) Act has become law. This lets websites remember your preferences for 'low-risk' cookies, such as which language or theme you want.

The law, implemented on 19 June, aims to simplify rules governing your data without weakening your privacy. Websites will still need to tell you they are using cookies, and let you opt out easily. And it doesn't affect more intrusive cookies, such as those websites use to track your activity online in order to show adverts.

Other changes in the law are more controversial. For example, it lets companies use Automated Decision-Making (ADM) more freely. These are computer algorithms that make decisions about matters such as loan applications, insurance quotes or health diagnoses. You'll have the right to challenge these decisions and demand that a human reviews them.

It also affects Subject Access Request (SAR), which asks a company for all the data it holds on you. Previously firms had to respond within 30 days and couldn't charge a fee. Now it can ask for longer and charge a "reasonable" fee for excessive requests.

Finally, rather than going straight to the Information Commission (the new name for the Information Commissioner's Office) about a company abusing your privacy, you have to contact the company and give it 30 days to respond.

Should Currys refund me for wrong processor

Q **Can I complain if my laptop doesn't have the advertised CPU installed? I bought a Lenovo 320S-14iKB (pictured) from Currys in March 2018, which was labelled as having a Pentium Gold 5405U processor. However, when I checked recently I found it's an Intel Pentium 4415U. This means I can't upgrade my laptop to Windows 11. Do I have a case for redress?**

Steve Millard

A We're afraid Steve doesn't have a case because too much time has passed. Under the Consumer Rights Act, customers have six years to seek help (five in Scotland). After that, you have to depend on the goodwill of the retailer or manufacturer.

The processor installed in his laptop, the Pentium 4415U, was released in early 2017. How the laptop ended up being mislabelled is unclear, especially as the Pentium 5405U wasn't released until January 2019 – almost a year after Steve bought the laptop.

If fewer than six years had passed since buying the laptop, Steve would certainly have a case against Currys under the Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 (which were superseded in April by the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act, DMCCA).

Technical specifications are a strong reason why customers choose one device over another, so retailers must make sure they're accurate. There's a slim chance Currys will offer a goodwill gesture, so we'll ask.

CASE ONGOING

Can EcoFlow refuse warranty from eBay item?

Q **I bought an EcoFlow River Max Power Station 512WH X-boost (pictured) from an eBay seller for £336.83. Although it works well enough, charging it requires a 240-volt supply, which means I can't use an in-car charger or solar panels. This makes it useless for our motor home. I contacted the eBay seller but received no reply, and EcoFlow won't help under the warranty. Can EcoFlow refuse to honour the warranty, or have I misunderstood consumer regulations?**

Andy Heads

A Yes, EcoFlow can refuse to help because Andy bought the power station from a private seller, not an authorised retailer. This invalidates the warranty. Instead Andy needs to contact the eBay seller ('Rancidninja2103'). This power station should charge via a car's 12V socket and usually comes with a compatible car charging cable. Because the unit doesn't perform as described, Andy is entitled to a full refund or replacement under the Consumer Rights Act.

However, the seller has since left eBay and is nowhere to be found. Andy should now ask his bank for a chargeback, explaining that he's been ripped off. Banks treat every case on its own merits. Andy can't use Section 75 for a refund because he paid by debit card not credit card.

Meanwhile, we'll contact EcoFlow to explain what has happened. It might be able to supply a new cable to fix the problem.

CASE ONGOING

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Plusnet credited me £368 for broadband delay

I recently decided to switch my broadband service from Sky (www.sky.com/broadband) to Plusnet (www.plus.net). However, Plusnet took over six weeks from the date I ordered it to get it up and running. This was extremely frustrating but it was not the fault of Plusnet or Sky. Instead Openreach was to blame, because it took them too long to install the cable to my home.

I recently received an email from Plusnet apologising for this delay. It also said the company would credit me £368.16 in total for my inconvenience. This level of compensation effectively means I won't actually start paying for my broadband until late next year. Now that is a great company to deal with.

Alex Tyrrell

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

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Plusnet

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- **Online** www.plus.net/contact-us
- **Phone** 0330 123 9123
- **X** https://x.com/plusnet

Grow Your Family Tree

For serious research you need to know when your ancestors were born and died. Follow **Richard Holt's** tips to...

Search the GRO's birth and death indexes

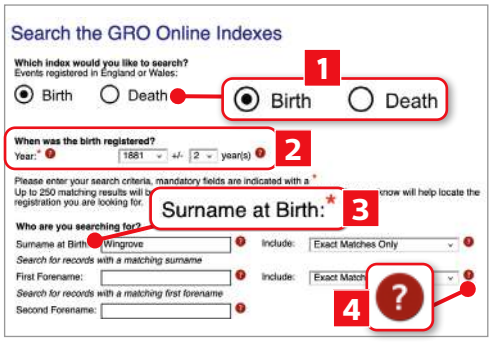
The General Register Office (GRO) is a vital resource for family historians tracing ancestors in England and Wales. You can search its online birth and death indexes for free – covering 1837-1934 and 1984-2023 (births) and 1837-1957 and 1984-2023 (deaths).

These offer more detail than other commercial services and volunteer-run sites such as FreeBMD (www.freebmd.org.uk). Notably, the mother's maiden name is provided for all births before September 1911, and the age at death in records before March 1866.

Type surnames and maiden names

Create a free account at www.snipca.com/55581 then log in and click 'Search the GRO Indexes'. Next, select Birth or Death (1 in our screenshot above right), then enter a year (with up to two years either side) 2. Search fields marked with a red asterisk are mandatory 3. Hover your cursor over the red question marks 4 for more information on each search box.

Unlike other indexes, the GRO shows given names in full, not just the first name and initials. For example, the record of my great-grandmother's birth in 1912 refers to her as 'Evelyn Ethel Minnie Wingrove', whereas other indexes show 'Evelyn E. M. Wingrove'. This helps to distinguish between individuals with similar names and initials.



Enter a name, pick a year and complete all fields marked with an asterisk beside them

You can also search by the mother's maiden name. My three-times great-grandparents Freeman Wingrove and Eliza Spicer married in 1879 and, according to the 1911 census, had 11 children. I searched for the surname Wingrove and mother's maiden name Spicer between 1879 and 1911. This helped me locate the births of all 11 children.

The death indexes include a person's age at death for all entries between 1837 and 1957. This can help identify the correct entry, particularly if you're looking at a common name, or the death occurred in an area you weren't expecting.

My six-times great-grandfather John Eggleton died in 1844 in the Wycombe district. I searched using his name and the year of his death, as well as the registration district where the death occurred. This gave two results for that year, one aged 21 and one aged 63. As the GRO index includes the age at death, I was able to eliminate the younger of the two results.

Buy PDFs or digital images

Until 2023 the only way to buy records from the General Register Office for England and Wales (GRO) was to pay £7 to download a PDF or £11 to order a certificate through the post (which is what I did with Evelyn Wingrove's birth certificate – pictured below). Later it started selling digital images of records for £2.50, which has since risen to £3.

Initially, digital images of birth records were available for 1837 to 1922, and death records between 1837 and 1887. This has been extended to include deaths up to 1957, giving you a better chance of finding the record you want. Digital images for Scottish certificates were already available from ScotlandsPeople (www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk).

Richard bought a copy of his great-grandmother's birth certificate from the GRO

Your Genealogy Problems Solved

I've traced much of my family back to the 1860s, and it seems I come from a long line of Anglican clergymen. Is there a set of records that might tell me more about their lives?

Tom Monkton

Try searching Ancestry's 'UK, Crockford's Clerical Directories' (www.snipca.com/55500), which contains editions from 1868, 1874, 1885, 1898, 1908 and 1932. It lists the education, ordination and postings of clergymen. Also visit https://theclergydatabase.org.uk, which contains records from 1540 to 1835.

Have a genealogy question for Richard? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Search Guernsey occupation and evacuee records

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Best Free Software

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

WEB BROWSER

DuckDuckGo 0.121.3

www.snipca.com/55750

What you need: Windows 10 or 11, macOS, Android or iOS

DuckDuckGo has given its privacy-focused browser a fresh look, both on desktop and mobile devices. By applying the same new design to all versions of the browser, it aims to make moving between devices "more seamless than ever", whether you sync your data across them or not.

The most obvious change is the use of rounded corners for the browser's menus, boxes and buttons. DuckDuckGo has also introduced a new, more modern 'colour palette' and redesigned the browser's icons.

These include the Fire button in the top-right corner, which deletes all your browsing data in one click, and the green shield button in the address bar. Clicking the latter opens Privacy Dashboard, which confirms DuckDuckGo's tracking protections are working for the current site.

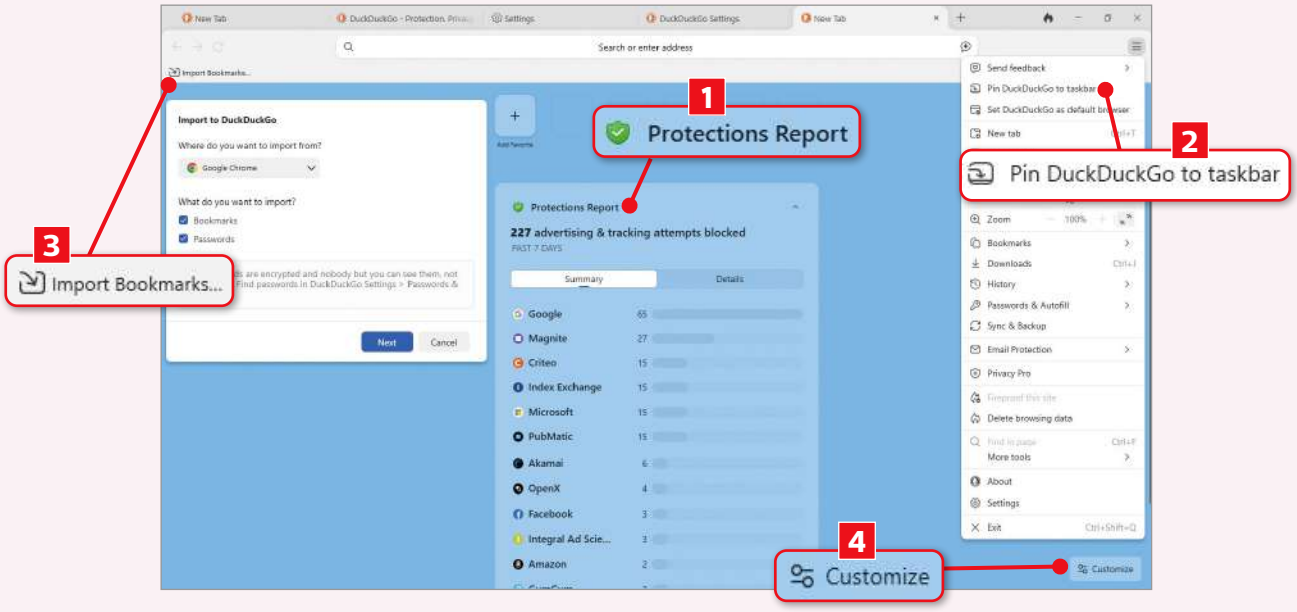
The other big change in the new version of the browser is easier access to DuckDuckGo's AI assistant Duck.ai. You can now open this in a new tab by clicking the speech-bubble icon at the end of the address bar, or by pressing Alt+N.

Unlike in other browsers, including Edge and Brave (DuckDuckGo's closest rival for privacy), the AI tool is intended to be optional and you can hide it by right-clicking its icon and choosing 'Hide Duck.ai shortcut'. Select 'Open Duck.ai settings' to remove all shortcuts for Duck.ai from the browser.

On the same page, click Open Search Assist Settings to disable AI features in DuckDuckGo searches. This includes enabling the new option for filtering out AI-generated images from search results.

As we reported in Issue 714 (page 11), DuckDuckGo has also updated the browser's Scam Blocker to warn you about 'scareware' and fake online shops. To ensure this option is enabled, select Threat Protection in Settings.

If you still see ads on some web pages, turn on DuckDuckGo's Enhanced Ad Blocking. You'll find this option at the bottom of the General page in Settings.



1 The Protections Report section on DuckDuckGo's New Tab page tells you how many ads and trackers the browser has blocked in the past seven days. Click 'Summary' to see the worst offenders for invading your privacy.

2 Click the menu button in the top-right corner to pin DuckDuckGo to your taskbar for easy access, and set it as your default browser. You can also open a new Fire window to switch to DuckDuckGo's private-browsing mode.

3 Import your bookmarks and passwords from another browser and password manager by clicking the Import Bookmarks button. Choose the service you want to import data from, click Next and follow DuckDuckGo's instructions.

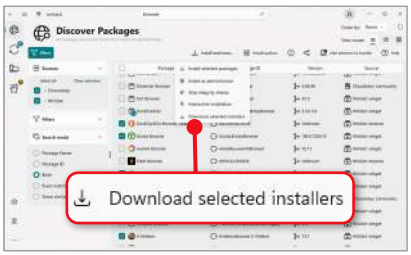
4 It's now possible to customise DuckDuckGo's New Tab page. Click the Customize button to select a solid colour (light blue in our screenshot) or gradient, or click Add Background to choose an image from your computer.

SOFTWARE UPDATER

UniGetUI 3.3.1

www.snipca.com/55744

What you need: Windows 10 or 11



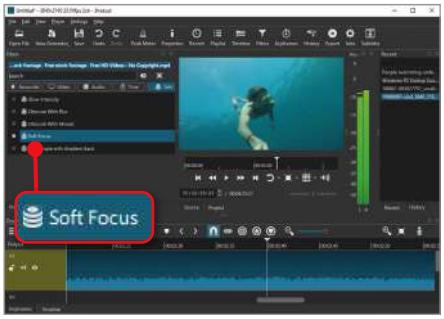
This free tool for installing software using package managers has been updated with some useful new features. These include the option to download multiple program installers in one go, so you can run them later. On UniGetUI's Discover Packages tab, select the software you want, then click the 'Install and more' button on the toolbar. Choose 'Download selected installers' (see screenshot) and specify where to save them – including on a USB stick. Another new option closes background processes that may stop a program installing or updating properly. To activate it, click the Settings cog in UniGetUI's bottom-left corner and choose 'Package operation preferences'. Tick the box 'Try to kill the processes that refuse to close when requested to'. UniGetUI may trigger a SmartScreen warning during installation, but it's safe to use so click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.

VIDEO EDITOR

Shotcut 25.07

www.shotcut.org

What you need: Windows 10 or 11, macOS or Linux



The latest version of this excellent free video editor introduces a new Soft Focus filter set for making your home movies look more dreamlike or nostalgic. To use it, click the Filters tab in Shotcut's top toolbar, followed by the plus-sign button. Select 'Sets' and choose Soft Focus (see screenshot) to apply the filters to your video. Another feature lets you adjust the audio levels of clips using their waveforms in your timeline. Simply drag the horizontal line up or down. Check the change in volume by clicking Peak Meter on the toolbar.

Other improvements in Shotcut 25.07 enhance the program's appearance. Its System theme is now darker, with higher contrast, and a new System Fusion option blends this theme with Shotcut's default look. Click the Settings menu and choose Theme to try both options.

£ SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

Google Photos Duplicate Remover

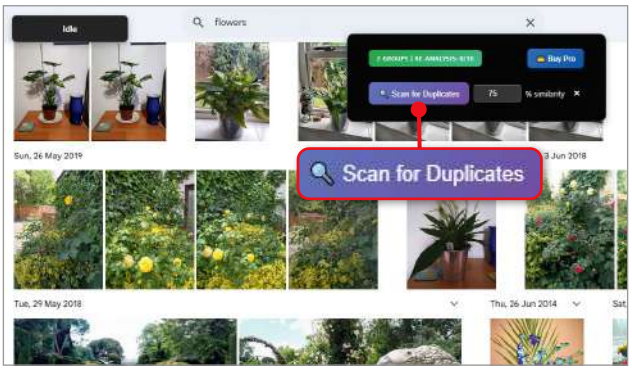
www.snipca.com/55760

Price: £8.97 **Free trial:** Yes, but limited

What you need: Chromium browser

Google Photos now groups similar images into 'stacks' to keep your photo library tidy. However, this only happens in its mobile apps, not the Google Photos website, so you're still likely to have lots of duplicate pictures and others with only tiny variations between them. The new unofficial Chromium extension Google Photos Duplicate Remover offers a simple, speedy way to detect and delete duplicate and similar photos, reclaiming valuable online storage.

To use it, type a keyword into the search box on the Google Photos site, such as the name of a place, subject or year the pictures were taken. When the results page loads, click 'Scan for Duplicates' (see screenshot) and, if you wish, specify the similarity threshold between images – the default is 75 per cent. The extension will open a new window and scan the photos for clones and near-clones.



When it's finished, it will present with you groups of duplicates so you can select images you want to delete. The catch is that the free version of the extension only removes duplicates from the first two listed groups.

To delete every duplicate photo it finds, you need to pay £9. It's a one-off fee, so pretty reasonable, but we weren't very impressed with the extension's scan results. It told us many completely different pictures were the same and failed to spot some genuinely similar shots.

OUR VERDICT: Don't pay for it

Paying for a browser extension is unusual, so you'd at least expect it to work, and Google Photos Duplicate Remover fails to achieve its aim. Sadly, there aren't any other reliable options for deleting duplicate images from Google Photos.

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

How do I move files between virtual machines?

Q I use two virtual machines and have been trying to work out a way of transferring files between them. Maybe it's not possible. But if anyone knows, it'll be *Computeractive*. Any advice?

Andy Craven

A We're assuming you're using VirtualBox 7.1 or later (www.virtualbox.org). You'll also need to install the Guest Additions package on both virtual machines, which adds extra drivers and functionality, including support for transferring files in several different ways. To do this, click the Devices menu while each virtual machine (VM) is running and choose 'Insert Guest Additions CD image' to run the installer.

Once installed, you need to drag and drop files from the VM window to a File Explorer window on your PC (and vice versa). First, launch the virtual machine containing the files you wish to transfer, then open the Devices menu and select 'Drag and Drop' followed by Bidirectional (1 in our screenshot below).

Now open the folder containing the files you want to transfer 2 and drag them to a folder window on your main PC. The file will either copy across immediately or – if it's a large transfer – you may see a progress window 3.

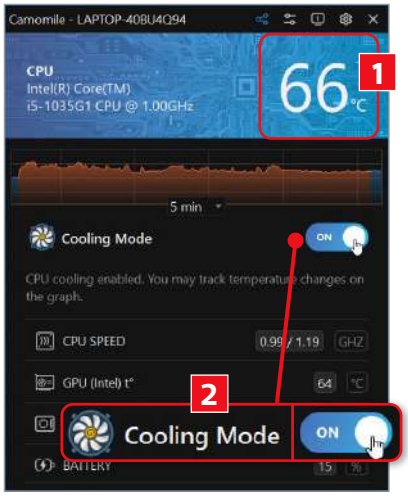
Once copied, shut down the source VM and open the virtual machine you want to transfer the files to. Again, make sure Bidirectional is selected before dragging the file from the folder window on your main PC to the target folder on the destination VM.

Other file-transfer options include VirtualBox's File Manager (click Machine, then File Manager). Alternatively, reconfigure both VMs so you can share files on your local network. Do this while the VM is shut down by opening its Settings, navigating to Network and selecting Bridged Adapter in the 'Attached to' dropdown menu.

Can I cool down my overheating laptop?

Q I recently bought a Lenovo ThinkPad laptop, which is fast and easy to use, but when I play games it gets hotter than an oven in the Sahara. Is there any way of controlling its power to lower the temperature?

Chris Hopkins



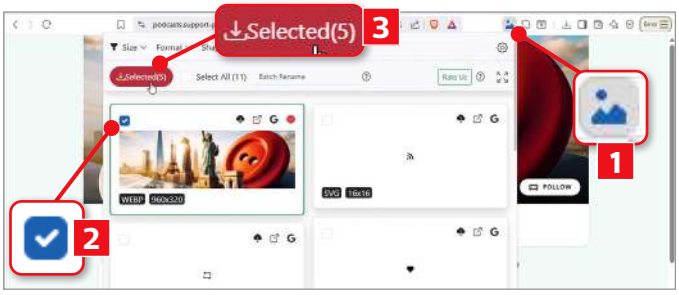
A Install Camomile (https://camomileapp.com), which shows your laptop's temperature (1 in our screenshot), and has a Cooling Mode 2 that limits your processor's performance to reduce the heat. It won't do this automatically – you have to turn it on yourself when it gets too hot. Your laptop will become slightly slower, but also cooler and quieter.

How can I quickly save loads of images from the web?

Q I need to find a fast way of downloading images from the internet. I don't want to use a complex program, so I was wondering if there's a browser extension that would do the job. I use Chrome and Brave.

Doug Matthews

A Try the extension Bulk Image Downloader (www.snipca.com/55539). Pin it to your browser toolbar, then click its icon (1 in our screenshot) and it will show all the images available to download. Select individual images 2 or Select All, then click Selected 3 to download them.



Email us your questions at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software trying to trick you

SOFTWARE WARNING!

Microsoft's money-grabbing games subscription

I barely understand Minesweeper's rules, yet I've spent hundreds of hours playing it and other classic Microsoft games like Solitaire and Mahjong. They're still on Windows 11, but the experience is unrecognisable from my youth – and not in a good way.

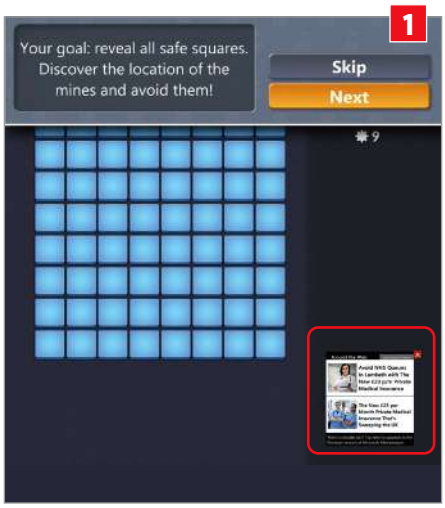
In Minesweeper, it's hard to tell whether you're meant to dodge adverts or bombs (see screenshot 1). After hitting a mine on my second click, I couldn't keep playing without watching an ad or coughing up £8.99 a year for the 'Microsoft Casual Games Premium Edition' 2. It's also overloaded with cartoonish visuals and frustrating paid-for gimmicks like unlocking features.

If I did pay £8.99 I could remove those ads and earn more 'XP' – which stands for 'experience points' and lets you decorate your account with rubbish like flashing badges.

Before June, that would cost £8.99 per game across all your devices. But Microsoft has changed this so you have to pay £8.99 per game *per* device. So to play Minesweeper on my laptop, phone and tablet I'd have to pay £26.97. Add Solitaire and Sudoku and it comes to £80.91 (see www.snipca.com/55629).

That's an eye-watering amount to pay for versions of the game that are far worse than the originals. I don't want endless nudges to 'level up' my gaming. I just want to last as long as possible without blowing myself up, then get back to whatever work I was avoiding.

I can do all that with this unofficial edition of the classic Minesweeper (https://minesweeper.online). No ads, no XP, no nonsense – and completely free.



It's just as hard to avoid ads in Minesweeper as bombs

Paying £8.99 removes ads, but you have to do it on every device

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Huawei on its Pura 80 Ultra phone

"The design draws inspiration from the timeless sunray motifs found in exquisite jewellery and luxury watches. This radiant sunburst pattern dazzles with intricate depth and harmonious interplay of light and shadow. The Pura 80 Ultra's lens is accentuated by a resplendent golden ring, forming the iconic forward symbol that boldly showcases the super brand emblem, creating a captivating visual centerpiece."

WHAT THEY MEAN

Our price of £1,150 draws inspiration from the timeless motif of using jargon to make tech sound desirable.

KEUMARS' VILLAIN OF THE FORTNIGHT

Paul Chowles

You may have become fed up reading about James Howell's attempts to persuade Newport city council to locate his hard drive containing more than £700 million-worth of Bitcoin, which he chucked out and is now lying somewhere on a rubbish tip. But at least he's going through the correct legal process in his attempts to become filthy rich (literally, if he ever gets permission to dig).

The same can't be said for Paul Chowles. Back in 2017, he was a National Crime Agency officer investigating criminal gangs selling illegal goods on the dark web. He sneakily stole 50 Bitcoin owned by one of the ringleaders and transferred it to a "retirement wallet". It was worth £60,000 then, and a staggering £4.4m now.

Chowles, 42, from Bristol 'earned' £613,000 through his theft before his colleagues caught him. He was sentenced to five-and-half-years in prison.

Credit National Crime Agency

ALL-IN-ONE PC | **£1,999** from Lenovo www.snipca.com/55624

Lenovo Yoga AIO 32i

Power without tower

All-in-one (AIO) PCs pack their internal components into the space behind the screen or – as here – within the stand. This means they take up less space than a standard desktop PC, which typically requires a separate tower unit connected to a monitor via cables. Lenovo has priced the Yoga AIO 32i at the upper end of what we might expect to pay for this type of machine, but it does include some impressively high-powered features.

> "The choice of processor means it qualifies as the only Copilot+ all-in-one PC on the market"

Starting inside, Lenovo has built this around the Intel Core Ultra 7 258V processor. This has been designed for the more limited spaces in laptops and mini PCs and is used here because the components have been squeezed into the base of the stand. Supporting the processor is an Nvidia GeForce RTX 4050 graphics card, which provides a lot more graphics than we normally see in AIOs. It also has a generous 32GB of RAM and a 1TB SSD.

This solid combination easily handles most everyday computing tasks, including office work and web browsing. The dedicated graphics card further enhances performance, providing enough power to run games smoothly at 1080p resolution and accelerate demanding graphics-intensive programs such as video editors.

Interestingly, the choice of processor means it qualifies as a Copilot+ device – the only AIO on the market to do so. It therefore comes with a version of Windows typically reserved for laptops and includes a smattering of AI-related tools, including for creating images.

When you also consider the 32in 4K monitor it starts to look much better value for money – most standalone 4K monitors start at around £300. And this screen has a very high-quality feel to it with uniform bezels around all four sides, while the design of the stand makes it look like the screen is floating above the base. The panel's glossy finish – instead of matte – does mean you can see reflections in a well-lit environment, but we prefer it because text looks incredibly crisp and clear at regular viewing distances. Our only complaint with the screen is that its refresh rate maxes out at 60Hz – we would have preferred 120Hz.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Intel Core Ultra 7 258V processor • 31.5in 3840x2160-pixel 60Hz IPS screen • 32GB RAM • Nvidia GeForce RTX 4050 graphics • 1TB SSD • 2x 5W speakers • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 5.4 • 5-megapixel webcam • 1x HDMI port • 2x USB-C ports • 2x USB 2.0 ports • Windows 11 Home • 538x724x253mm (HxWxD) • 8.17kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55624

The built-in speakers sound great, featuring two tweeters that fire from the base and two 5W subwoofers located behind the screen to create deeper bass. The audio is Dolby Atmos and sounded crystal clear until we cranked the volume up to maximum, at which point the quality started to deteriorate.

Our primary gripe, overall, is with the location of the ports (pictured below left), which are on the rear of the base and therefore hard to reach. If you tend to regularly swap cables, this will be a major inconvenience. Nor does it have a wide selection of connections – two USB-C ports (one supports DisplayPort; the other Thunderbolt 4), along with an HDMI and a pair of USB 2.0 ports. It lacks an Ethernet socket for wired networking.

VERDICT A powerful all-in-one PC that can run games as well as office tools, and has a stunning 4K screen

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Dell OptiPlex All-in-One 7420 £742 A cheaper alternative, but it comes with a smaller screen and less potent components

LAPTOP | **£799** from Dell www.snipca.com/55644

Dell 14 Plus 2-in-1 Laptop

To have and to fold

If you want a small, versatile laptop, we don't think there's much to beat this Dell 14 Plus 2-in-1 for the price at the moment. It improves on our previous favourite – the Dell Inspiron 14 Plus (£969 from www.snipca.com/55245, reviewed in Issue 683) – in a number of ways. Not least, the price. At the time of writing it was being discounted to £799, though if you find the price has gone back up to its RRP of £999, we'd still recommend it.

> "The screen is made for productivity work, not editing photos or playing videos"

The '2-in-1' element stems from the flexibility of the device's 360-degree hinge. The touchscreen opens and closes like a normal laptop, but if you keep pushing it back it will flatten out, then continue all the way around back on itself, effectively becoming a Windows tablet. The hinge is strong enough to hold firm at any point so you can work on it at any angle.

The keyboard is functional, but for most people it'll do the job just fine, while the trackpad occasionally felt a little sticky. The webcam is a solid 1080p at 30fps, which is pretty standard, but does have a physical privacy shutter, which is excellent.

The screen is configured for productivity work, rather than editing photos or playing videos. It can still manage those tasks, but the brightness and colour accuracy lag behind pricier laptops with OLED panels, so it isn't the laptop to choose if you do a lot of graphics work.

Our review unit featured an Intel Core Ultra 7 256V processor, 16GB RAM and a 512GB SSD – a solid configuration for everyday tasks that compared well in our tests against similarly equipped models like the Inspiron 14 Plus. In fact it slightly outperformed the Inspiron in Windows benchmarks and had a significant edge in graphics performance (though it's a pity the display doesn't fully capitalise on this) and battery life, which lasted an impressive 15 hours 14 minutes in our web-browsing simulation tests.

While we wouldn't recommend it to gamers, it'll still run reasonably well if you keep your expectations realistic. We got *Civilization VII* chugging along at a healthy 60fps at 1080p resolution, with the detail settings dropped to medium. Increasing the detail drops the frame rate, but it's perfectly adequate for casual gaming.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Intel Core Ultra 7 256V processor • 16GB RAM • Intel Arc graphics • 14in 1920x1200-pixel 60Hz IPS touchscreen • 512GB SSD • 2x USB-C ports • 1x USB 3.2 port • 1x HDMI port • 1x 3.5mm audio jack • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 5.4 • Windows 11 Home • 16.4x314x226mm (HxWxD) • 1.61kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55644

LEFT EDGE

RIGHT EDGE

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *PC Pro*, *T3* and *What Hi-Fi*, and the websites Laptop Mag (www.laptopmag.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT Our new favourite laptop is great value, particularly if you stick to Windows work and web browsing

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE PCSpecialist 16 Fusion £996 Less powerful, but has a larger, brighter screen for a similar price

PRINTER | **£247** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55670

Xerox C235dni

Fantastic four

The Xerox C235dni is a four-in-one colour laser machine, capable of printing, scanning, copying and faxing. It can churn out up to 22 pages per minute and is aimed at people with home offices that want high-quality prints but don't want to wait for them.

It's small enough to fit on a desk, with a footprint of just 412x394mm (WxD) but still provides plenty of room for paper storage – 250 sheets in its main paper tray, while the top-mounted sheet feeder holds up to 50 pages for scanning or copying. There's also a multipurpose feed on the front that can accept specialist paper such as card, envelopes or letter-headed sheets, though it only takes one item at a time. It can also print on both sides of a sheet automatically, which is great for minimising waste.

> "With colour graphic documents, maps and line drawings, it turned out clear and vibrant results"

The large 2.8in touchscreen is angled upwards for easy viewing, and its large menus are clear and simple to use. There's a port next to it that accommodates a USB stick or drive for printing files from or saving scans to. The C235dni can also cable up to a PC via a USB port on the back, or connect to Wi-Fi so it can be used by all devices on your network.

We had no problem setting things up. The supplied quick start guide is straightforward and the four toner cartridges come pre-loaded. It's simply a case of removing all the packaging tape, loading some paper and plugging it in.

You can enter the Wi-Fi password using the touchscreen or use the Xerox Easy Assist phone app (for iOS and Android). This will automatically connect the printer to whatever network the phone is connected to.

The print yield of the supplied toner is a little low – the included starter cartridges provide enough toner for just 500 pages of black text and 500 pages of colour. When these run out you can buy either standard or high-capacity replacements, with the latter offering the best value for money – the black cartridge costs £94.21 direct from Xerox and prints 3,000 pages, which works out at a reasonable 3.1p per page.

The three colour cartridges are more expensive at £104.17 each, and will cover around 2,500 pages between them, which works out to 12.5p per page. That sounds expensive compared with an ink-tank model such as the Epson EcoTank ET-1810 (£140 from www.snipca.com/52191, see our Buy It! alternative on page 33), which prints colour pages for as little as 0.3p per page, but it isn't bad for a colour laser.

For comparison, the cartridges in the HP LaserJet Pro 3202dw (£265 from www.snipca.com/51219, reviewed in Issue 689) cost 3.3p for mono pages and 14.5p for colour prints.

Being a laser printer, you don't need to worry about it drying out if left unused, but you will need to change the waste toner bottle every 15,000 pages or so. Replacement bottles cost around £18.

Print quality is excellent – it produced uniformly bold and precise pages of text in our tests. We also tried it with colour graphic documents, maps and line drawings, and it turned out clear and vibrant results. Like most laser printers, it isn't great at reproducing photos, with its maximum print resolution of 600x600 dpi. For photos, you're better off with an inkjet.

We also tested the sheet feeder on the top and it proved more than capable of processing big piles of documents for scanning and copying. It doesn't offer double-sided scanning, but it can automatically condense two sheets from the scanner on to two sides of a single sheet when printing.

SPECIFICATIONS

A4 4-in-1 multifunction colour laser printer • Uses four toner cartridges (black, cyan, magenta and yellow) • 250-sheet paper capacity • 600x600dpi print resolution • USB, Ethernet and Wi-Fi connections • 307x412x394mm (HxWxD) • 19.4kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55670

VERDICT Provides high-quality prints, copies and scans in both mono and colour, though won't do justice to photos

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE HP LaserJet Pro 3202dw £265 An even smaller colour laser printer, but it lacks the copy and scan functions, and running costs are more expensive

SMARTPHONE | **£600** from Motorola www.snipca.com/55793

Motorola Edge 60 Pro

High rola

The Motorola Edge 60 Pro is the premium model in Motorola's Edge range of smartphones, sitting above the similar-looking Edge 60 (£380 from www.snipca.com/55733) and the Edge 60 Fusion (£300 from www.snipca.com/55734). However, with a faster processor, larger screen and higher-capacity battery, the Edge 60 Pro offers the best performance of the three. It isn't Motorola's most expensive phone – its Razr models with folding screens start at £800 – but the Edge 60 Pro is currently at the top of Motorola's range of non-folding smartphones.

> "A phone with a decent performance and a price to match"

Its MediaTek Dimensity 8350 processor, 12GB of RAM and 512GB storage is certainly a generous specification, but in practical use it doesn't do enough to trouble our current favourite smartphone, the more affordable Samsung Galaxy A56 (£424 from www.snipca.com/54585, see page 30). The processor in the Edge 60 Pro ran about 20 per cent faster than the A56's in tests that push it to its limits, but that's not a sufficient performance boost to merit the additional £170 in price.

The screen measures 6.7in across the diagonal and has a resolution of 2712x1220 pixels. It's extremely bright, with a maximum of 4500cd/m², making it comfortable to use outside even on the sunniest days. Large screens tend to have a negative impact on battery life, but it sailed through a day of use without any trouble. You'll need to charge it daily, though, because it didn't last to the end of a second day.

The Edge 60 Pro has three cameras on the back, with an ultrawide and a 3x optical telephoto lens joining the regular camera. This gives you plenty of options when shooting, but photos looked worse than those taken by the Galaxy A56.

As usual, Motorola has used a version of Android 15 with few modifications, though it has added some AI tools to help you find your way around the operating system. It comes with four years of Android updates, so you won't be forced into buying another smartphone prematurely by lack of support.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core MediaTek Dimensity 8350 processor • 12GB RAM • 512GB storage • 6.7in 2712x1220-pixel AMOLED screen • 50-megapixel rear camera • 50-megapixel ultrawide camera • 10-megapixel telephoto camera • 50-megapixel front-facing camera • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.4 • Android 15 • 161x73x8.2mm (HxWxD) • 186g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54747

VERDICT Has a large screen and plenty of storage, but it can't quite match similarly priced rivals

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Samsung Galaxy A56 £424 Not as fast and less storage, but excellent for the price

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

Glossy and matte-finish monitors

What does it do?

The finish on your screen can have a profound effect on image quality, comfort and ease of use. Glossy screens produce more vivid images but are prone to glare and distracting reflections. Matte screens are less reflective but their colours can look washed out.

How does it work?

A screen's reflectivity depends on the transparency of its surface. Glossy screens allow light to pass through unimpeded, but they also reflect light directly, so light from windows and other sources can bounce straight at you. Matte screens diffuse light, which makes reflections less of a problem. However, this also effects the quality of light coming from the screen, which can leave colours less vivid and contrast weak.

What are the specs?

Annoyingly, manufacturers rarely state whether their screens are glossy or matte in the specifications. If possible, it's worth viewing one before you buy. Otherwise, look out for phrases such as "anti-glare", which suggest that the screen has a matte finish.

Can I change it later?

If your screen is too glossy you can buy a screen that makes it less so. The Mamol Privacy Screen (£19.99 from www.snipca.com/55741, pictured above) is a good example. It reduces surface reflections and cuts glare by filtering out blue light. It also improves privacy by making your screen more difficult for onlookers to see. Sadly, there's no safe and easy way to turn a matte screen into a glossy one.

E-PAPER TABLET | **£500** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55694

Boox Note Air4 C

Positive inking

The Boox brand is more often associated with ebook readers than tablets, but the Note Air4 C sits somewhere between the two types of device. Like an ebook reader it has an E Ink screen that is perfect for reading comfortably and, in this case, writing on using the included stylus. However, it runs a customised version of Android 13, so you can also install apps, use office tools and perform other tasks for which you'd usually need a tablet.

> "Writing and drawing on this feels as natural as using pen on paper"

The stylus and paper-like display are the Note Air4 C's main selling points. It's marketed as a note-taking tablet and is truly excellent for this. In our tests it felt as natural to work with as a pen and paper, whether we were writing, drawing or annotating. Of all the tablet and stylus combinations we've tested, it feels by far the best.

The 10.3in E Ink colour touchscreen isn't as bright as a typical tablet screen but its paper-like properties make it easy to read in direct sunlight. It also uses a lot less power than most tablet screens – its battery lost just 20 per cent of its charge after a week of heavy use. Because it's more efficient, the screen doesn't keep switching off to conserve power, either. However, you wouldn't want to watch a video or play a game on it, because its refresh rate is very slow, so this is not a direct replacement for a conventional tablet.

We loved the design. At just 6mm thick, it's slim and comfortable to hold. A wider bezel along one of its long sides makes it easy to hold in one hand while reading or taking notes. A magnet on the opposite edge lets you dock and charge the stylus, which according to the manufacturer offers 4,096 levels of pressure sensitivity.

Inside the Note Air4 C is an eight-core processor, 6GB of RAM and 64GB of storage, while its custom user interface is layered on top of Android 13. Boox has tailored this to work well with a stylus and E Ink display, so it's not a frustrating experience. You can even sync your notes and other projects to cloud services and other notetaking services, including Microsoft's OneDrive and OneNote.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core processor • 6GB RAM • 64GB storage • 10.3in 2480x1860-pixel E Ink Kaleido 3 screen • Wi-Fi • Bluetooth 5.1 • Android 13 • 226x193x5.8mm (HxWxD) • 420g • Two-year warranty www.snipca.com/55694

VERDICT The perfect device for taking notes, but you'll need a traditional tablet for watching videos and playing games

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Amazon Kindle Scribe £380

Amazon's alternative is more affordable but lacks a colour screen

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

What's the best 5G router for my home?

Q I switched from wired broadband to mobile internet in 2020, and I wouldn't go back. I get 170Mbps download speeds compared with my area's best wired speeds of 40Mbps, and I love the fact that there are no contracts or mid-term price hikes.

I've been using the excellent Huawei B535 4G LTE router, but now that 5G is available in my area, I'd like to upgrade. I need a router that can connect to 64 devices – I've already got more than 40. Can you suggest a model that has Ethernet ports and, if possible, an RJ11 socket?

Martin Bottrill

A The only 5G router we've found that has an RJ11 socket (a standard telephone port) is the Draytek Vigor 2865L-5G, but it costs an astronomical £540 from www.snipca.com/55700. It doesn't sound like you had an RJ11 port with the Huawei B535, so if you can live without that, you have more options.

We'd recommend the Zyxel FWA505 (pictured), which costs a far more reasonable £190 from Amazon at www.snipca.com/55701. It does most of the things you're looking for, including support for up to 64 devices.

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

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MOUSE | **£46** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55686

SteelSeries Rival 3 Wireless (Gen 2)

Scroll with it

The SteelSeries Rival 3 Wireless (Gen 2) has plenty going for it and all for a reasonable price. Open the box and you'll find the mouse itself (available in black, white, light blue or lavender), a USB-A wireless dongle and two AAA batteries. The latter aren't rechargeable but should last around 200 hours, though the Rival 3 accommodates rechargeable AAA batteries if you have them.

The Rival 3 is relatively small and usable by both right- and left-handers. The moulded design fits snugly in your palm but it lacks the ergonomic trappings of the likes of the Logitech Lift Vertical Mouse (£40 from www.snipca.com/41687, reviewed in Issue 631).

Build quality is solid, with no flexing, tight seams and a robust feel to the plastic case. The entire rear section houses the battery compartment, but thankfully the lid is firmly attached. There's also a slot for storing the dongle inside the mouse, which is useful if you often switch between devices or mostly use Bluetooth.

We've seen more expensive mice with higher optical resolutions than its 18,000dpi, but its sensor was precise and smooth in our tests, and the buttons were consistently clicky and bouncy. The associated app lets you remap your buttons, assign macro shortcuts and enable high-efficiency mode, which extends battery life by reducing sensitivity and deactivating the lights.

SPECIFICATIONS

SteelSeries TrueMove Air Optical Sensor • 18,000dpi • 1,000Hz polling rate • Six programmable buttons • Connects via Bluetooth 5.0 or 2.4GHz USB receiver (included) • Requires 2x AAA batteries • 38x67x121mm • 106g (with batteries) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55686

VERDICT A wireless mouse that's built to last, though you will have to keep replacing its batteries

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Logitech Lift Vertical Ergonomic Mouse £40 A slightly more affordable alternative that's comfortably shaped to better support right-handed users

EARBUDS | **£99** from OnePlus www.snipca.com/55687

OnePlus Buds 4

Silent treatment

This fourth generation of earbuds from Chinese manufacturer OnePlus has made an impressive leap in quality and features – specifically its noise-cancelling, which is the best we've come across at this price. In our tests, it completely eradicated background noise, no matter how loud it was. Previously, you'd need to spend twice the price of these earbuds to find noise-cancellation as good as this.

The design is also top notch. The buds themselves weigh less than 5g each and are incredibly comfortable to wear for long periods. Likewise, the charging case is small and lightweight.

Overall sound quality is outstanding, with a strong focus on bass, but this is well balanced with higher notes, which are never drowned out. Vocals, guitar rhythms and piano harmonies all come through with clarity and definition, enhancing those meaty lower frequencies. In other words, music sounds punchy and vibrant through these buds.

This might have added up to a five-star review, but the connection between the buds and the app that controls the buds reset every time we put them away. This means you have to reconnect them through your phone's Bluetooth settings every time you use them, which is a hassle we could do without.

Battery life is also a bit of a letdown, lasting just six hours with noise cancelling active, though this stretches to 11 when it's switched off. Thankfully, the case provides enough charge to keep them topped up for 45 hours.

SPECIFICATIONS

11mm woofers • 6mm tweeters • 45-hour battery life with case • Active noise cancellation • Bluetooth 5.4 • IP55 ingress protection • 4.7g per bud • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55687

VERDICT Classy earbuds with superb noise-cancellation, though a low battery life and fiddly app take the edge off

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Sony WF-C710N £100 Noise cancellation isn't as good, but a better app makes them easier to use

SMART TV | **£479** from Very www.snipca.com/55739

Sharp 70GK4245K

Sound off

Televisions vary enormously in price, but this is the first time we've seen a 70in TV below £500. We've seen many TVs with much smaller screens at almost twice the price. So the big question is what has Sharp taken out to keep the price down?

At first glance, it's not easy to tell. Its 4K screen supports HDR and Dolby Vision, while its audio system handles Dolby Atmos. Some cost-cutting is evident in the build quality. It feels light and a little flimsy, but once you get it into position, it doesn't look like a budget TV. It's worth noting that the set is 1.5 metres wide and its feet are very close to the edges, so you'd need a piece of furniture wide enough for it to sit on.

> "Audio sounded like it was struggling out of the speaker"

Its TiVo operating system is as slick and stable as we've seen on any set, offering Netflix, Disney+, YouTube, Amazon Prime Video, BBC iPlayer, ITVX, All 4, My5 and Freely. The only mainstream service that's missing is Apple TV+, but you can subscribe to that through Prime Video.

The TV has plenty of ports, including three HDMI, a couple of USB 2.0s, Ethernet and a 3.5mm headphone jack.

Pictures looked natural during our tests, with impressive colour reproduction that's balanced, with no tones standing out too strongly. The screen was bright, displaying crisp highlights in its HDR mode. Contrast was also good, but because it doesn't have localised dimming of the backlight, we found that some light leaked through in the darkest scenes, turning blacks into dark greys (something you wouldn't see on a more expensive OLED TV). This was most pronounced around the edges of the screen, but it didn't spoil the overall impression.

We spotted some blurring of large, fast-moving objects, but there was none of the smearing or jerkiness that can plague larger screens. It also upscaled low-resolution video sources well.

However, it's with audio quality where Sharp has cut the most corners. Action scenes and dense musical scores sounded as if they were struggling to escape from the speaker, whether we used Dolby Atmos or not. Dialogue isn't clear enough as a result, and bass sounds lacked punch.

Thankfully, you can fix this easily if you're willing to spend some money on a soundbar or speaker. The Sony HT-SF150 (£99 from www.snipca.com/53955) is a good example.

SPECIFICATIONS

4K 3840x2160-pixel resolution • 70in VA-type LCD screen • Supports HDR10, HLG, Dolby Vision • 3x HDMI ports • 2x USB 2.0 ports • 1x Ethernet port • 952x1556x274mm (HxWxD) • 19.8kg • One-year warranty • www.snipca.com/55739

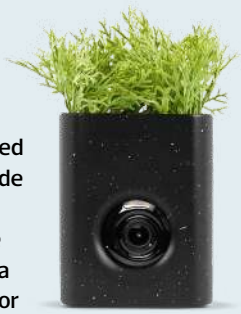
VERDICT For under £500 the 70in screen is impressive, but the poor audio means we can't recommend it

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Bush 43UT24SB £179 A smaller 43in TV with good picture and sound quality for an attractive price

DO I REALLY NEED...

a vase cam?



What is it?

Security camera manufacturer Wyze has launched a vase you can hide your camera in. Called simply the Cam Vase, it has a hole in the front for the lens and a space above for a short plant pot. It costs $19.99 (around £15) from www.snipca.com/55759.

What does it do?

It disguises your camera as a house plant. There's a hole in the base for the power cable, so it isn't obvious that anything is hidden inside.

What's the catch?

It won't fool anyone who gives it more than a cursory glance, and you can't put a real plant in it because the camera might get wet when you water it. It comes with a plastic plant, but you can provide your own. We couldn't find a UK supplier, so you'd need to import it.

So can I do without it?

Yes. Visible security cameras are a good deterrent to burglars.

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

NEW ENTRY

Dell 14 Plus 2-in-1
£799 from www.snipca.com/55644
Tested Issue 716

Push the screen back 360 degrees and it effectively becomes a Windows tablet. Screen is superb, and performs basic tasks well. Still good value even if price rises to RRP of £999.

ALTERNATIVE PCSpecialist 16 Fusion British-made laptop with superb screen and built for advanced AI tasks. £996 from www.snipca.com/55094

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £675 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 11
£329 from www.snipca.com/54887
Tested Issue 711

With a faster processor and increased storage (from 64GB to 128GB), the 2025 edition of the iPad is simply stunning. Battery life is over 11 hours, which is better than any other iPad, including more expensive models.

ALTERNATIVE iPad mini 7 The 2024 version of the mini improves the colour accuracy on the 8.3in screen and has a more powerful processor. £499 from www.snipca.com/52573

ANDROID TABLET

OnePlus Pad 3
£529 from www.snipca.com/55302
Tested Issue 714

With an incredibly fast processor and stunning 13.2in screen, this is the best ever Android tablet, and rivals the iPad Air. At launch both the 12GB RAM/256GB and 16GB/512GB versions were £529, so grab the latter as soon as possible.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 Has a much brighter screen than its predecessor, making it ideal for watching TV. Also has a faster processor, speeding up tasks. £649 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/50039

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 16
£799 from www.snipca.com/53981
Tested Issue 695

This is the best new iPhone for years, boosted by a processor that's as fast as much more expensive models. The screen is excellent, while the new Camera Control button gives lots of ways to take photos.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone 14 Now heavily discounted, this remains a speedy phone with great features and an impressive camera. £499 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/53982

ANDROID PHONE

Samsung Galaxy A56
£424 from www.snipca.com/54585
Tested Issue 709

The successor to Samsung's mid-range A55, this has a stunning screen and lasted over 29 hours in our tests. It's faster than Google's Pixel 7a in all tasks, and has AI-powered photo tools.

ALTERNATIVE Google Pixel 7a Cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, it uses AI to improve photos and lasts 10 hours. Has fast processor and 8GB RAM. £449 from www.snipca.com/55250

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

MINI PC

GMKtec NucBox K11
£700 from www.snipca.com/54341
Tested Issue 707

A fast and powerful machine, but what really sets it apart are the ports letting you upgrade it – such as the OCuLink connection for graphics cards. Also has six USB ports, 32GB RAM (upgradeable to 96GB) and a 1TB SSD.

ALTERNATIVE Geekom A8 Too small to accommodate many ports, but makes up for it with a 2TB SSD and SD card slot for adding storage. £799 from www.snipca.com/55383

EBOOK READER

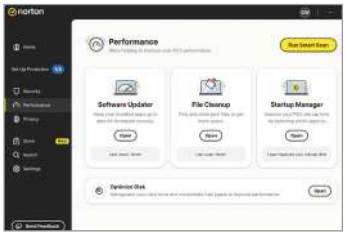
Amazon Kindle Paperwhite
£160 from www.snipca.com/52730
Tested Issue 698

The sixth version of the Paperwhite has a larger screen (7in), faster page turns and longer battery life (12 weeks – up from 10). Its glare-free finish means you can easily read it in bright sunlight, and its 300ppi resolution makes text a joy to read.

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Libra Kobo's first colour e-reader, with over 4,000 tones to make illustrations and photos leap out. £210 from www.snipca.com/50192

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Deluxe 2025
£14.99 from www.snipca.com/54797
Tested Issue 629



Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm Gen Digital, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a three-device, two-year licence at a special discount price. Other versions are available.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £24.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Obsbot Meet SE
£79 from www.snipca.com/54725
Tested Issue 710

The Meet SE from Chinese firm Obsbot beats the picture quality of our previous favourite, Logitech's C925e. Colours are vibrant and accurate, with terrific detail even in poor lighting thanks to a relatively wide aperture.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video that can also capture voice from a distance. £63 from www.snipca.com/55780

PC MONITOR

Philips 27E1N1600AE
£188 from www.snipca.com/54190
Tested Issue 692

An affordable 27in monitor with a sharp resolution, impressive image quality and a sturdy build. It has an HDMI port, a USB-C port and two USB 3.0. The hefty base means you can raise and tilt the monitor easily using just one hand.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution and a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £229 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 1TB
£80 from www.snipca.com/52658
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £76; 2TB costs £150.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £76 from www.snipca.com/53808

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 4...
Twelve South ButterFly SE chargers

Combine all your charging needs in one, compact and beautiful solution with the Twelve South ButterFly SE. Ideal for travel as it fits in the palm of your hand, the 2-in-1 Qi charger lets you simultaneously charge your iPhone and Apple Watch (both pictured) or AirPods from just one outlet.

Strong magnets hold ButterFly SE closed while in your bag, which you can then unfold as required to charge devices. More than a charger, ButterFly SE morphs into a hands-free display stand, so you can stream TV or use FaceTime. It can also be used as a compact display stand when you're just charging your Apple Watch.

It's compatible with iPhones with MagSafe, Apple Watch and AirPods with Wireless Charging Case – and can be used with any 30W+ USB-C power adapter (not included). It comes with a braided USB-C charging cable.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/55489 and submit your details by midnight Tuesday 26 August. Good luck!

You can buy **Twelve South's ButterFly SE chargers** for £99.99 from www.snipca.com/55490. For more information on Twelve South's chargers visit https://twelvesouth.co.uk and 'like' www.facebook.com/twelvesouth.

PRINTER

HP OfficeJet Pro 9135e
£186 from www.snipca.com/53101
Tested Issue 700

A versatile cartridge printer-scanner for the home office that makes printing jobs quicker and easier than most of its inkjet rivals. Colour prints cost a reasonable 6p per page, while mono costs 2p. Printed text is superb and photos are pretty good too.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £140 from www.snipca.com/52191

SMART TV

Bush 43UT24SB
£180 from www.snipca.com/53637
Tested Issue 703

It's rare to find a 43in TV this cheap, especially with a superbly bright screen. Sound isn't bad either, and it offers most of the streaming services, including Freely. Its TiVo operating system is very easy to use.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung CU8000
More expensive, but has a 55in LED screen and sharp 4K resolution. Connectivity is good, with three HDMI and two USB ports. £399 from www.snipca.com/55557

ROUTER

Asus RT-AXE7800
£180 from www.snipca.com/52957
Tested Issue 665

This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £219 from www.snipca.com/52051

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HOW TO...

Create your own NAS drive using an SD card

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: Raspberry Pi Zero 2 W; high-capacity microSD card; DietPi software **Time required:** Two hours

The price of memory cards is plummeting. You can pick up a 256GB SanDisk Ultra microSD card for just £19 (www.snipca.com/55636) – that's a lot of storage for relatively little money. There are plenty of ways to put it to good use – slip it into a digital camera and it'll hold thousands of photos. But for something more ambitious, why not combine it with a Raspberry Pi and the free DietPi operating system to create your own network-attached storage (NAS) drive?

Here, we're going to use the Raspberry Pi Zero 2 W, which measures just 30x65mm and includes a 1GHz processor, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth. It costs £14.40 (www.snipca.com/55600) and runs on a microUSB connection. You may already have a suitable USB charger, but if not, the official 12.5W Raspberry Pi adapter costs £9 (www.snipca.com/55602).

1 Download DietPi

Visit www.dietpi.com and click Download at the top (1 in our screenshot below). Click 'Raspberry Pi 2/3/4/Zero 2' 2, then the Download link to the right of 'Download Image' 3.

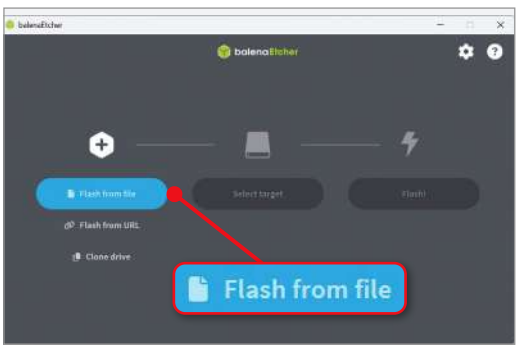
While that's downloading, download balenaEtcher, which you'll use to copy DietPi to your memory card. Click the download link to the right of 'Etcher for Windows (X86|X64) (Installer)' at www.snipca.com/55597.

Finally, plug your SD card into your PC – which you can do directly if it has an SD card slot. If not, buy an external SD card reader, like Benfei's 4-in-1 device (£7 from www.snipca.com/55637). Windows may ask you to decide how it should handle external storage devices – you can ignore this for now.

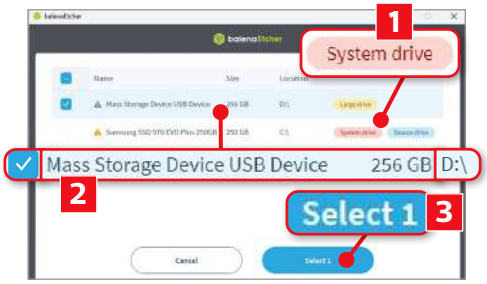
When both DietPi and balenaEtcher have finished downloading, close your browser and open Windows File Explorer. Launch the 'balenaEtcher-2.1.2.Setup' file from your Downloads folder. Click 'Flash from file' (see screenshot below), then navigate to your Downloads folder, select 'DietPi_RPi234-ARMv8-Bookworm.img', and click Open.

Now click 'Select target' and choose your memory card. Be very careful, as balenaEtcher will have access to every storage device attached to your computer,

DietPi is a free download, available for a wide range of single-board computers, including Raspberry Pi



Click 'Flash to file' and balenaEtcher will copy DietPi to your memory card and make it bootable



BalenaEtcher will tell you which is your system drive, so make sure you choose your SD card

including the internal hard drive. Fortunately, the boot drive will usually be hidden, and if you click the option to show hidden drives you'll see a red button beside it saying 'System drive' (1 in our screenshot above).

Other drives won't show this warning, but because your SD card is the size of a hard drive, there's a risk you might mix it up with one. To double-check, open File Explorer and see which letter Windows has assigned to your card. In our case, it's D:\, so we know that in Etcher we need to tick the box beside this 2 and click 'Select 1' 3.

You'll now be returned to balenaEtcher's home screen. Check your two selected options and, if they are definitely correct, click 'Flash!' to copy DietPi to the memory card. Etcher will warn you that "you are about to erase an unusually large drive". Again, check you've not made a mistake, then click 'Yes, I'm sure'.

When Windows asks if you want to allow the app to make changes to your device, click Yes. How long this takes depends on the speed of your computer and your SD card's write speed. It took under a minute for us, plus 40 seconds to verify that the process had worked.

After balenaEtcher ejects the SD card you'll need to make some more changes. Disconnect and reconnect the reader so that it appears in File Explorer, then click through to the card. Again, it should have the same drive letter as it did in balenaEtcher (D:\ in our case).

2 Edit your settings

Open the file called 'dietpi.txt', then press Ctrl+F and search for 'AUTO_SETUP_NET_WIFI_ENABLED'. When Notepad locates it, notice it has '=0' at the end. Change this to =1. Press Ctrl+S to save the file, then close it by pressing Ctrl+W.

Now open the file 'dietpi-wifi.txt', which should be directly below the 'dietpi.txt' file you just edited. The fourth line of the file is aWIFI_SSID[0]=''. Type your wireless network's name between the single quote marks, complete with any required capitalisation. In our case, because our network is called Ovingo, the complete line is: aWIFI_SSID[0]='Ovingo' (1 in our screenshot above).

On the eighth line (aWIFI_KEY[0]='') type your Wi-Fi network password between the single quotes – for example, aWIFI_KEY[0]='abcpassword' 2. Now press Ctrl+S followed by Ctrl+W to save and close the file.

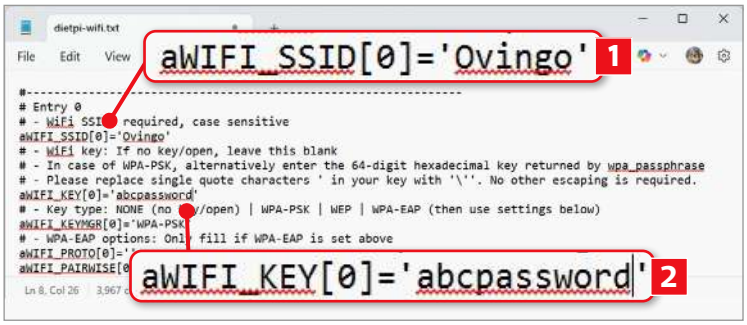
How I use Raspberry Pis

I have dozens of Raspberry Pis on my home network. Some host files, some play music, a couple are acting as an internal communications system between two home offices, and others are tracking planes and logging the weather. Will I ever stop finding uses for them? Perhaps one day, but in the meantime I'm having fun.

Nik Rawlinson

How do use your Raspberry Pi?
Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

You need to edit the initial DietPi configuration files by hand

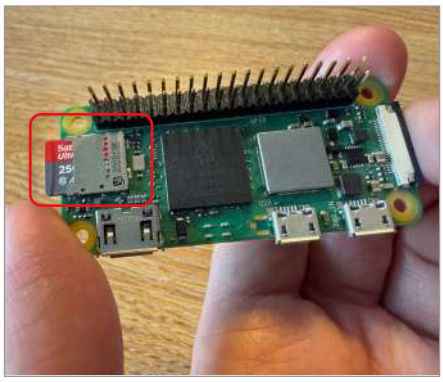

dietpi-wifi.txt
File Edit View
aWIFI_SSID[0]='Ovingo'
1
# Entry 0
# - WiFi SSID required, case sensitive
aWIFI_SSID[0]='Ovingo'
# - WiFi key: If no key/open, leave this blank
# - In case of WPA-PSK, alternatively enter the 64-digit hexadecimal key returned by wpa_passphrase
# - Please replace single quote characters ' in your key with '\''. No other escaping is required.
aWIFI_KEY[0]='abcpassword'
# - Key type: NONE (no key/open) | WPA-PSK | WEP | WPA-EAP (then use settings below)
aWIFI_KEYMGR[0]='WPA-PSK'
# - WPA-EAP options: Only fill if WPA-EAP is set above
aWIFI_PROTO[0]=''
aWIFI_PAIRWISE[0]
aWIFI_KEY[0]='abcpassword'
2

3 Boot your Raspberry Pi

Remove the memory card from your PC and insert it into your Raspberry Pi. To do this, hold the board so the USB connectors are visible, and facing you. Now hold the card so the copper connectors are underneath and to the right. Slide it as far as it will go into the slot on the left edge of the board (pictured below left). When it's in place, connect the board to your power adapter and plug it in.

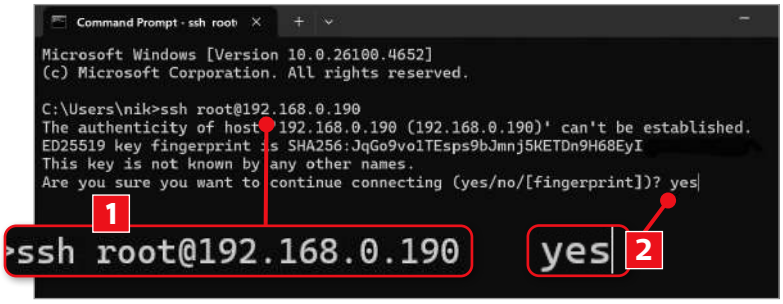
It should immediately turn on and boot. Give DietPi 10 minutes to load properly. Log into your router's administration pages or, if it has a smartphone app, use that to find the list of connected devices. Look for a device called DietPi and check its IP address – ours is 192.168.0.190 (see screenshot below).

Open the Start menu, type cmd and press Enter. Now type ssh root@192.168.0.190 but replace those digits with your Raspberry Pi's network



Slide the SD card into the slot on the far left of the board

Our Raspberry Pi's network address is 192.168.0.190


Command Prompt - ssh root
Microsoft Windows [Version 10.0.26100.4652]
(c) Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.
C:\Users\nik>ssh root@192.168.0.190
The authenticity of host '192.168.0.190 (192.168.0.190)' can't be established.
ED25519 key fingerprint is SHA256:JqGo9vo1TEsps9bJmnj5KETDn9H68EyI
This key is not known by any other names.
Are you sure you want to continue connecting (yes/no/[fingerprint])? yes
1
ssh root@192.168.0.190
yes
2

Type these commands so you can connect to your Raspberry Pi remotely

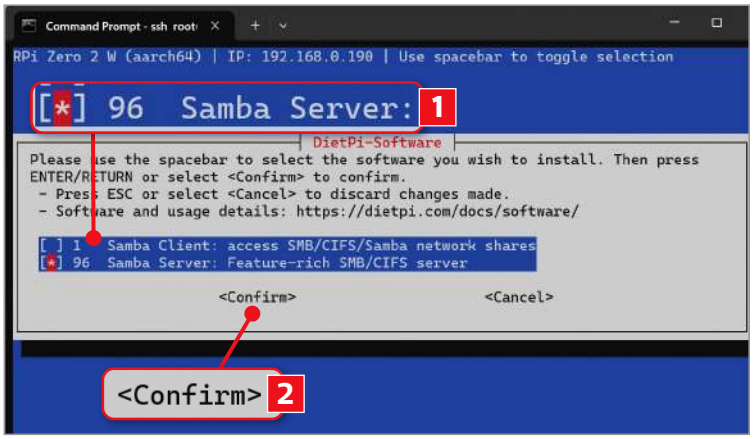
address (1 in our screenshot above). Windows will ask you to confirm that you want to connect. Type yes 2 and when prompted for a password type dietpi and press Enter.

Allow DietPi to do some housekeeping, giving it time to reboot and restart. It will now repeat the ssh command that we used above to log in and ask you to enter a new password. Type it in and press Enter, then type it again and press Enter to confirm. Next, you'll need to enter a password to authorise software installations – again you'll need to do that twice.

The following step asks if you'd like to disable the serial/UART console. Press your Tab key twice to select Yes, then press Enter. You'll arrive at a screen headed DietPi-Software. This is the software installer, much like the Microsoft Store built into Windows.

4 Set up your NAS drive

Use the down arrow key to move to Search Software, then press Enter, type samba, and press Enter. Press the down arrow key, then space to put an asterisk beside Samba Server (1 in our screenshot below), then press the Tab key to select Confirm 2 and press Enter. Samba is the file-server software that will be the brains of your NAS drive. Use the arrow keys to move down to Install, then press Enter.


Command Prompt - ssh root
RPi Zero 2 W (aarch64) | IP: 192.168.0.190 | Use spacebar to toggle selection
[*] 96 Samba Server:
1
DietPi-Software
Please use the spacebar to select the software you wish to install. Then press ENTER/RETURN or select <Confirm> to confirm.
- Press ESC or select <Cancel> to discard changes made.
- Software and usage details: https://dietpi.com/docs/software/
[ ] 1 Samba Client: access SMB/CIFS/Samba network shares
[*] 96 Samba Server: Feature-rich SMB/CIFS server
<Confirm>
<Cancel>
<Confirm>
2

Place an asterisk beside 'Samba Server' then select Confirm

DietPi-Software will now check that you want to install the software you've selected. Press tab to select OK, then press Enter. The installer will take a few minutes to work through its tasks. Now leave 'Opt OUT and purge uploaded data' selected, then press Tab key to highlight Select followed by Enter.

5 Set up a 'super user' account

Back at the command prompt you need to set up an account to access Samba. Type sudo mkdir -p /mnt/files. Sudo makes you a 'super user' with extra privileges. The rest of the line creates a folder for your shared files. Next, type these two lines, pressing Enter after each:

```
sudo chown -R 775 /mnt/files
sudo chown -R dietpi:dietpi /mnt/files
```

These control who can access shared files and what rights they have. Type sudo nano /etc/samba/smb.conf to use the 'nano' text editor to open the Samba configuration file. Scroll to the very bottom, press Enter to move to a new line, then type the following (or copy it from our Pastebin account at www.snipca.com/55643):

```
path = /mnt/files
browseable = yes
writable = yes
guest ok = yes
create mask = 0775
directory mask = 0775
```

Press Ctrl+X, then press Y when asked 'Save modified buffer?'. Press Enter then restart Samba by typing: sudo systemctl restart smbd. Press Enter.

6 Fix your Pi's network address

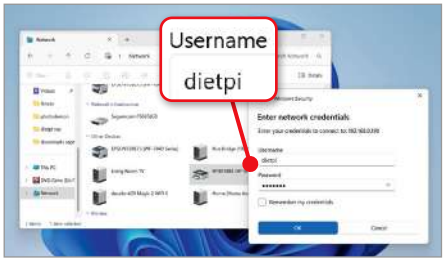
Your Raspberry Pi's IP address is randomly assigned, and while it often stays the same, it can change. That makes reconnecting a pain if you have to look it up every time. So, when it's finished installing Samba and returns you to the command prompt, type sudo dietpi-config and press Enter. Use the down arrow key to select 'Network Options: Adapters' and press Enter, then select WiFi and press Enter. Select 'Change Mode' and press Enter, then with OK selected on the next screen, press Enter again.

Use your arrow keys to move down to Copy and press Enter. This copies the current address of your Raspberry Pi on the local network. Now highlight Apply at the bottom of the screen, then press Tab to highlight Select and press Enter. Press tab to select OK and press Enter. DietPi will now always use the current address to connect to your Wi-Fi.

7 Connect to your NAS

Highlight Back twice and press Enter each time. Then, highlight Exit, press Enter and close the window you've been working in. Open File Explorer and click the address bar at the top of the window. Type the following and press Enter, replacing 192.168.0.190 with your Pi's address: 192.168.0.190\files

Windows will find your Raspberry Pi on the network and ask for a username and password. Type dietpi as your username (see screenshot below) and the password you set when it asked you to change your password the second time you booted your Pi. This will open a File Explorer window. Drag and drop a folder into it and it will be copied across the network to the SD card in your Raspberry Pi. You've just created a NAS drive.



Type dietpt as your username and the password you previously set

Test your speed and check if your ISP is to blame for faults

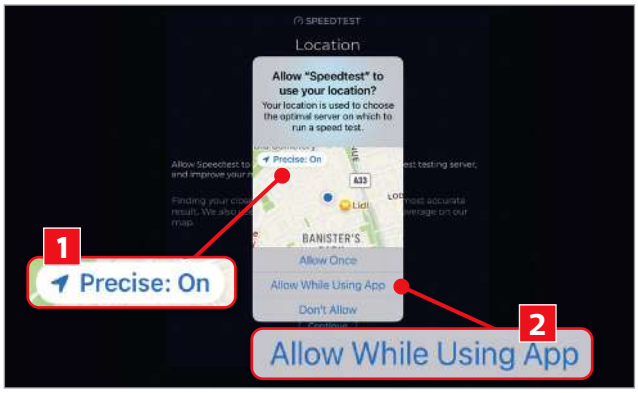
What you need: Ookla Speedtest for Android or iOS
Time required: 30 minutes

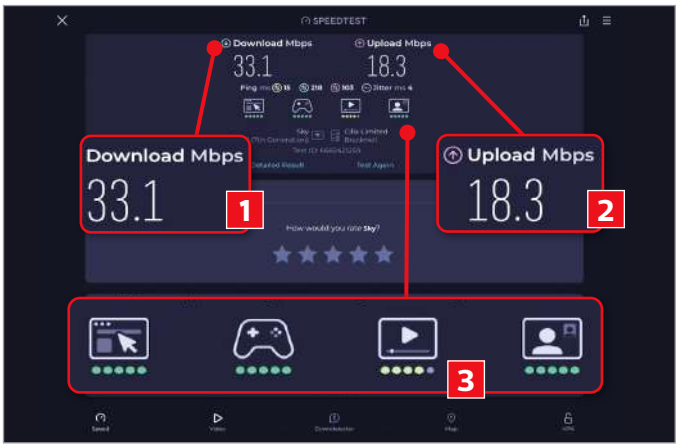
Ookla Speedtest (www.speedtest.net) is the most popular free tool for testing the upload and download speeds of your internet connection. It's easy to use, works in your browser and has apps for Windows, macOS, Android and iOS. The mobile apps were recently updated to provide more detailed test results through a new feature called Experience Ratings. This evaluates the suitability of your connection for different online activities.

Ookla has also improved the Speedtest app's integration with its Downdetector tool, which monitors outages across thousands of services worldwide – including ISPs. This helps you work out whether a slow and unreliable internet connection is caused by a problem with your router or your internet provider.

STEP 1

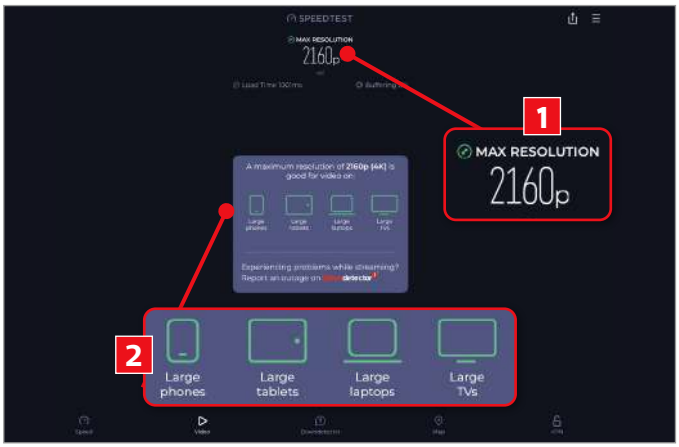
Install the Ookla Speedtest app (Android www.snipca.com/55655; iOS www.snipca.com/55656) on your phone or tablet. When the app opens, it will ask you to 'review your privacy options', which involves granting permission to access your precise location 1 – choose to do so only while using the app 2. On an Android phone or iPhone, you also need to grant permission to 'make and manage phone calls', so it can test the speed of your mobile-internet connection. On the final privacy screen, tap Reject All to stop Ookla sharing your data with advertisers.





STEP 2

Ookla Speedtest will now open on its Speed tab, where you'll see the name of your ISP or mobile network at the bottom of the screen. Tap the Go button to start the speed test, and the app will measure your connection's download 1 and upload speeds 2, and 'ping' (the delay in sending and receiving data). You'll also see Speedtest's new Experience Ratings below the main results 3. These show how well your connection can perform activities such as web browsing, gaming, streaming and video calling. The more green dots, the better the performance.



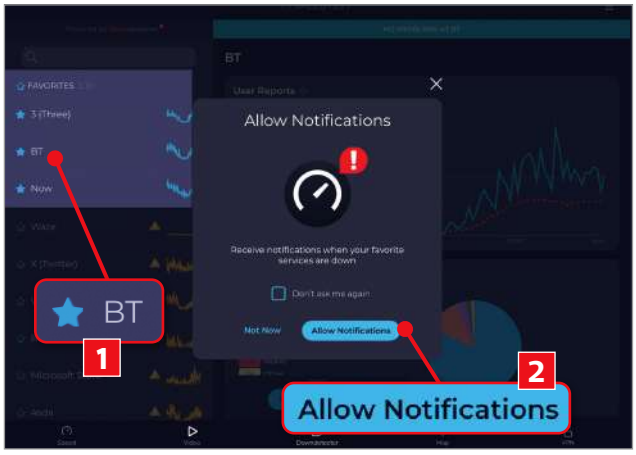
STEP 3

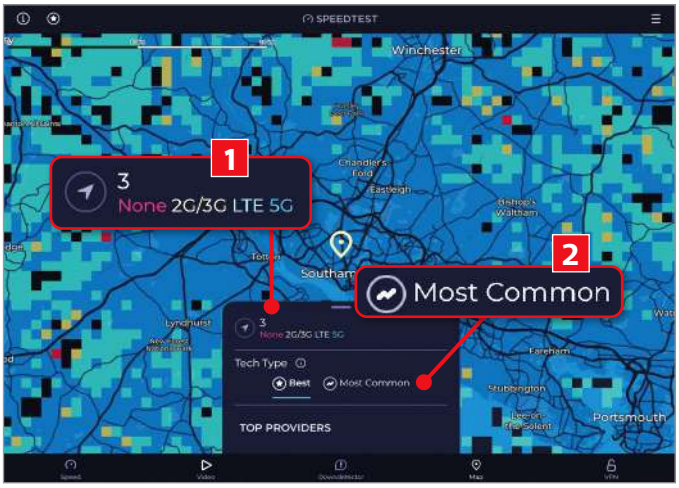
On the Video tab, you can test your connection's 'adaptive bitrate', which determines how well it can stream video of up to 4K. Speedtest will tell you the maximum resolution supported by your current internet speed 1, and on which devices it will display reliable, high-quality videos – such as a large phone, tablet and TV 2. Although this test isn't essential, it helps you identify whether buffering and poor picture quality are caused by your connection or the streaming service you're viewing.

STEP 4 Next, tap the Downdetector tab 1. This is the most useful feature in Speedtest, other than the speed test, informing you when online services including websites, apps, your ISP and mobile network are suffering outages and performance problems. This data is based on reports from users, and is constantly updated and displayed in the form of colour-coded line graphs. For example, a red graph with a peak on the right 2 indicates a high volume of recent reports, yellow graphs mean a moderate number and blue graphs 3 suggest things are generally working fine.

STEP 5 Tap the name of your internet provider to check for any current problems. As well as a detailed graph showing the incidence of user reports over the past 24 hours, Speedtest provides a pie chart 1 that breaks down the type of issues reported. With an ISP, the most important categories are Internet, 'Landline internet' 2 and Broadband. If these have a large pie slice and high percentage, you can attribute problems you're experiencing to your internet provider, as you can see from BT's chart and graph in our screenshot (taken 25 July). Tap 'Report A Problem' 3 to submit your own report.

STEP 6 A new feature in the Speedtest app lets you save up to 20 companies as 'favourites', so you can instantly see when their services are suffering outages and other problems, and receive notifications when they occur. You'll need to sign up for a free account by tapping the three-line menu button, then Create Account. Once signed in, press the star 1 next to the name of a service to add it to your favourites then tap Allow Notifications 2 – you only need to do this for the first company you make a 'favourite'.





STEP 7 Speedtest's other new feature, which compares your broadband speed with other ISPs in your area, is currently limited to the US. However, its Map tab lets you check how your mobile connection compares. Select your network 1, if it's not automatically detected, to see a colour-coded map showing the best speeds achieved in different parts of the UK. Yellow squares indicate 2G/3G, light-blue ones LTE (4G) and dark blue 5G. You can switch the speed data from Best to Most Common 2.

Readers' Tips

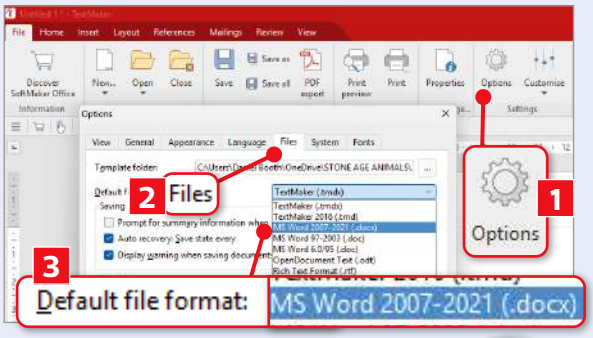
TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Change default file format SoftMaker saves in

You recommended some excellent programs in Issue 713's Cover Feature ('Best free software you'll master in minutes'), but I was particularly pleased to see you praise SoftMaker FreeOffice (www.snipca.com/55249). I switched to SoftMaker from LibreOffice last year and haven't regretted it.

But I still need to save files in other formats – usually Microsoft's DOCX for Word documents – so they can be easily opened when I send them to work colleagues and friends. To make this easier, I've told TextMaker (which is SoftMaker's Word equivalent) to save in DOCX by default.

How you do this depends on the toolbar you're using. I use the red ribbon, which means clicking File, followed by the Options icon (1 in our screenshot) then the Files tab 2. Then it's simply a case of choosing your format from the 'Default file format' dropdown menu 3. If you use a different toolbar you might need to click Tools to find Options.



Steven Wilson

Steven wins a copy of our 2024 Back Issue CD

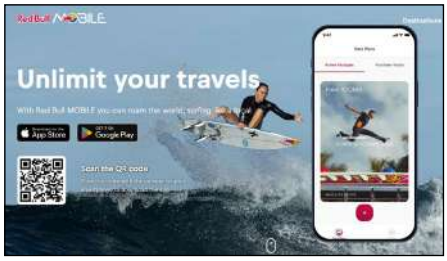
Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/53433

MOBILE

Use Red Bull's Mobile eSIM on cruise ships

In Issue 713's Problems Solved section (page 67), you told reader William Robertson there were no eSIM options for getting internet access during a cruise. We've just been on a cruise and used Red Bull's Mobile eSim service (www.snipca.com/55491, pictured below left) which cost 15 euros for 1GB. It relies on the Telenor Maritime network, so you need to check if your ship supports this – check at www.snipca.com/55492. It's not as fast as the ship's Wi-Fi, but it's a lot cheaper if you just need it to keep in touch.

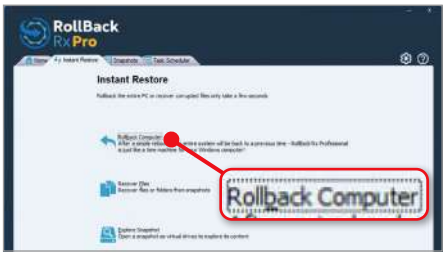
Charlie Cornish



SOFTWARE

Take snapshots of your system using RollBack

As you say in Issue 714's 'Question of the Fortnight', System Restore in Windows can be a lifesaver. But it can only be accessed after the computer has booted, and it doesn't protect individual files or folders. A much better option, and one that has saved my bacon on countless occasions, is RollBack Rx Professional (www.snipca.com/55540, pictured above).



This gem saves not only your Windows settings but also your files and folders. You can take as many 'snapshots' of your system as you like, going back months or years – right back to when the computer was brand new. You can access RollBack

Why I stopped using...

YouTube's website

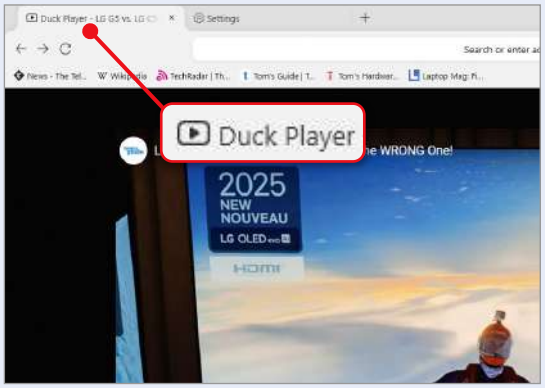
YouTube doesn't allow ad-blockers, which is part of its strategy to make you pay for its ad-free Premium tier. This obviously makes it a lot of money.

And what I use instead

I now watch videos using the **Duck Player**, which is built into the DuckDuckGo browser. This applies YouTube's strictest privacy settings to block trackers and personalised ads. When you click a YouTube link while browsing in DuckDuckGo, it loads in Duck Player by default – as you can see in the tab (see screenshot). It still connects to YouTube, but you don't fully load the site.

It's not just a good alternative to YouTube. It also means you don't need to add an extension to YouTube to block ads, or use sites like FreeTube (https://freetubeapp.io). All you need to do is install DuckDuckGo's browser from www.snipca.com/55508.

Marek Wesolowski



Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk

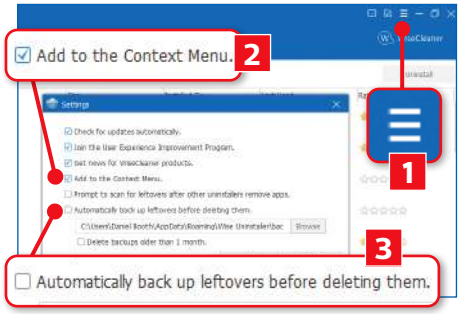
either from your desktop or when the computer is booting, so that if Windows won't load you can roll back to a snapshot when all was well. The program isn't cheap ($69 as a one-off licence, around £51) but to me it's been worth every penny. It comes with a 14-day free trial.

Carl Hughes

SOFTWARE

Add Wise Program Uninstaller to your right-click menu

You recommended Wise Program Uninstaller (www.snipca.com/55188) as an 'easy' program for removing unwanted software (Issue 713, page 51) and I agree it's simple to use. You can actually make it easier by adding it to your right-click menu. Open it then click the three horizontal lines top right (1 in screenshot below) followed by Settings. Now tick 'Add to the Context Menu' 2.



While you're there, you may want to untick 'Automatically back up leftovers before deleting them' 3. If I've decided to uninstall a program, I'm confident I'll never need to use it again – and leftover files are rarely essential. Click OK.

Note that the right-click option only appears when you right-click a program's icon, not a blank space of your desktop. In Windows 11 you'll also need to click 'Show more options' at the bottom of the context menu.

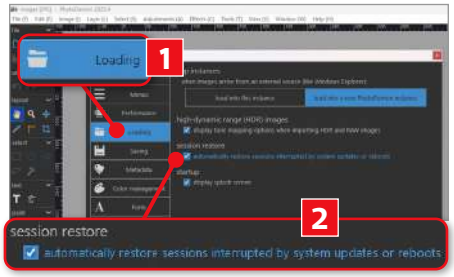
Jim Betts

SOFTWARE

Restore photo-editing sessions if your PC reboots

I've been using PhotoDemon (https://photodemon.org) since your recent recommendations, and agree with your view that it's one of the easiest photo editors ever developed. The makers of GIMP (www.gimp.org) should take note!

However, several times I've lost my edits because Windows has decided to crash or update without warning. I've now taken precautions against future disasters by setting it to restore my photo-editing session if reboots or crashes occur.



Open PhotoDemon then click Tools at the top followed by Options (or press Ctrl+K). Now click Loading (1 in our screenshot above) and tick the box 'automatically restore sessions interrupted by system updates or reboots' 2. Click OK to confirm.

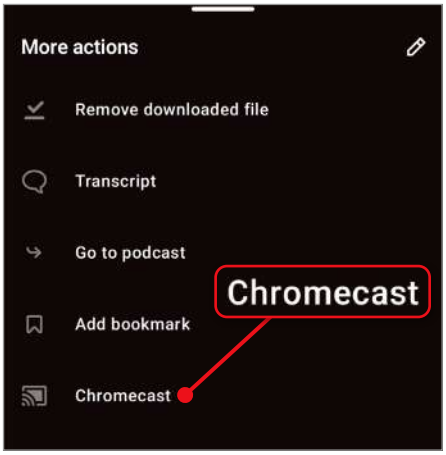
Simon Jones

APP

Cast podcasts from phone to TV

My evening habit for the past few years has been to listen to podcasts on my phone while out walking the dog. I've just realised that I can cast these podcasts from my phone to my TV, which I often do now to finish episodes when I return home.

I do this by plugging my Chromecast into my TV, then selecting my podcasts app (Pocket Casts, https:/pocketcasts.com). I then start playing an episode and tap the three vertical dots at the bottom



right followed by Chromecast (see screenshot above). When it finds my TV, I just press play, put my feet up and listen.

Keith Jacobs

PHONES

Check your vibration is working

Reading Issue 715's 'Question of the Fortnight' (page 10) on the Government's emergency alert due in September reminded me that when the last test was sent in 2023 my Samsung Galaxy phone played the alarm but didn't vibrate. I then discovered a secret code you can type into your phone to check whether vibration is working: *#*#0842#*#*. I don't think it works on all Android phones, but it's worth trying.

Phil Tyler

Reader recommends...

Canon i-Sensys LBP243dw mono printer

£179 from www.snipca.com/53462

I run a society through my local church that requires me to print many items every week. These are in black and white, and I've never had a personal need for a colour printer. So when my ageing HP LaserJet started to splutter and fail earlier this year, I started to shop around for a cheapish replacement.

A potential replacement came in Issue 702 (page 25), with your five-star review of the Canon i-Sensys LBP243dw. It ticked many of the boxes I need in a printer, including a paper tray that can hold 200-plus sheets and double-sided printing.

I also needed it to be fast. In your tests it printed 33 pages per minute. I've enjoyed a similar speed since buying it in April. The documents I have to print are quite basic and it might slow down if I had to print complex graphics, but it's worked brilliantly so far.

The toner is set to last for 1,500 pages, which is pretty good value.

Peter Crawley

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

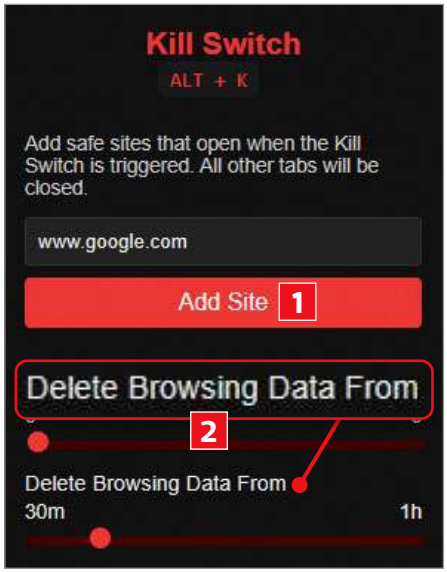
CHROMIUM

Add a 'kill switch' to your browser

Stop nosy parkers seeing what you're looking at online by installing the new extension Kill Switch (www.snipca.com/55608). This instantly closes all open tabs when you press its keyboard shortcut Alt+K.

It then opens a fresh browser window with no tabs displayed, though you can specify a 'safe' site to load. Click its toolbar button, enter the URL and click Add Site (1 in our screenshot below)

Kill Switch also deletes your browsing history to prevent people from peeking at sites you've previously visited. Use the Delete Browsing Data From slider 2 to specify the time period – from 30 minutes to 24 hours.

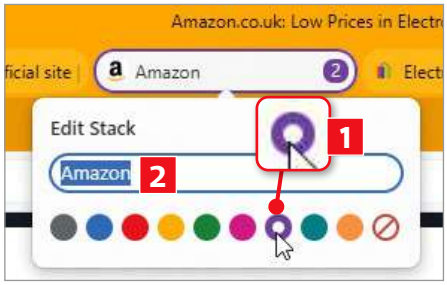


VIVALDI

Assign colours to your tab stacks

Vivaldi is already the most vibrant browser, with its toolbars changing colour to match the site you're visiting. Vivaldi 7.5, released in July, also brings colour to the browser's Tab Stacks feature, which is Vivaldi's version of tab groups.

When you group a set of related tabs, by dragging them over each other – or by right-clicking and choosing 'Stack Tabs by Host' – you can now assign a colour to each 'stack'. Just right-click the relevant stack, select Edit and click the colour you want to use (1 in our screenshot below left). You can also change the name of the stack 2.



CHROME

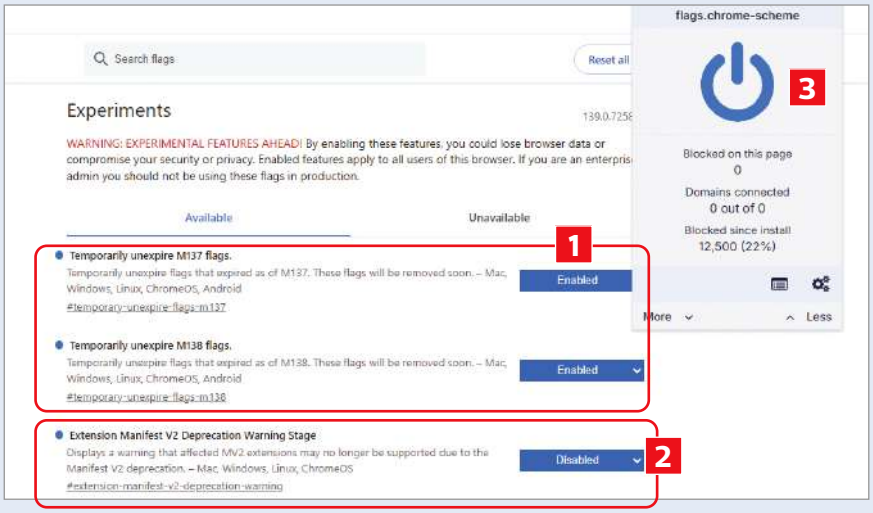
Re-enable uBlock Origin – for now

Google has now permanently disabled the popular content blocker uBlock Origin (www.snipca.com/55558) in Chrome, and won't let you turn it back on. However, there is a workaround that re-enables the extension, though only until 2 September when Chrome 140 is released.

To try it, type chrome://flags in the browser's address bar and press Enter to load the Experiments page. Search for the flags 'Temporarily unexpire M138 flags' and 'Temporarily unexpire M137 flags', select Enabled in their dropdown menus (1 in our screenshot) and click Relaunch.

When Chrome reopens, search for Manifest V2 on the Experiments page, and set it to Disabled 2. Also find the flag 'Allow legacy extension manifest version' and choose Enabled in its dropdown menu.

Relaunch Chrome and uBlock Origin should be active again 3 – if not, switch it on via the Extensions page (chrome://extensions). Chrome 140 will remove these flags, so you'll need to use the Manifest V3-compatible uBlock Origin Lite (www.snipca.com/55555) to block online ads.


flags.chrome-scheme
Search flags
Reset all
Experiments
WARNING: EXPERIMENTAL FEATURES AHEAD! By enabling these features, you could lose browser data or compromise your security or privacy. Enabled features apply to all users of this browser. If you are an enterpris admin you should not be using these flags in production.
Available
Unavailable
3
Blocked on this page
0
Domains connected
0 out of 0
Blocked since install
12,500 (22%)
1
Temporarily unexpire M137 flags.
Temporarily unexpire flags that expired as of M137. These flags will be removed soon. – Mac, Windows, Linux, ChromeOS, Android
#temporary-unexpire-flags-m137
Enabled
More
Less
Temporarily unexpire M138 flags.
Temporarily unexpire flags that expired as of M138. These flags will be removed soon. – Mac, Windows, Linux, ChromeOS, Android
#temporary-unexpire-flags-m138
Enabled
Extension Manifest V2 Deprecation Warning Stage
Displays a warning that affected MV2 extensions may no longer be supported due to the Manifest V2 deprecation. – Mac, Windows, Linux, ChromeOS
#extension-manifest-v2-deprecation-warning
Disabled
2

FIREFOX

Free up memory by unloading tabs

Back in Issue 704 (page 43), we wrote about an experimental Firefox feature called Unload Tab. This prevents inactive tabs from using memory in the background, and potentially causing the browser to freeze when your PC runs low on RAM.

Firefox 140 makes this feature official, letting you free up memory manually from tabs you're not using but might return to later. Simply right-click a tab and choose Unload Tab (see screenshot above) to put it to sleep – its favicon will now appear greyed out. Click an unloaded tab to wake it up again and restore RAM to the page.

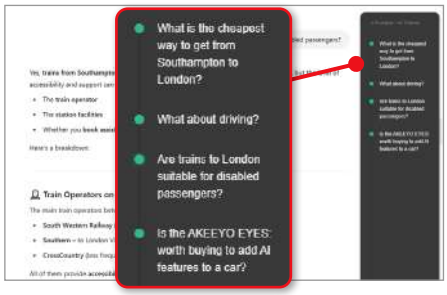
CHATGPT

View summaries of your prompts

ChatGPT's chat history keeps a record of your conversations and names them according to the initial prompts. You can revisit these chats by clicking their titles on the left-hand side of the ChatGPT website, but to find the answer to a specific question you need to search for a keyword.

The new Chromium extension ChatSight (www.snipca.com/55609) makes things easier by listing all the prompts you used in a ChatGPT exchange. Click one to jump straight to that question or command, and view ChatGPT's response, without needing to scroll.

The prompts appear in a sidebar (see screenshot below), which you can show or hide by pressing Ctrl+Shift+M. ChatSight is particularly useful for finding information in long conversations that veered off topic.


What is the cheapest way to get from Southampton to London?
What about driving?
Are trains to London suitable for disabled passengers?
Is the AKEEYO EYES worth buying to add AI features to a car?

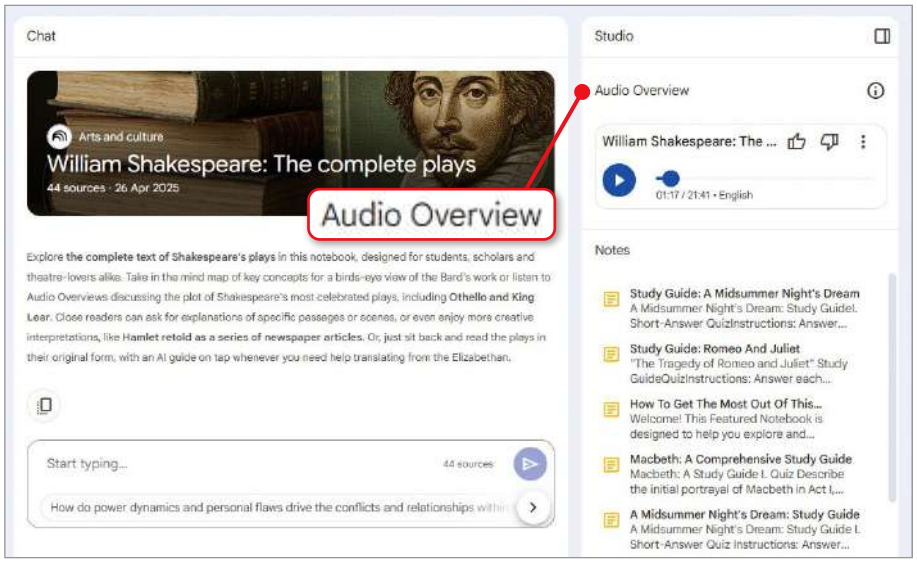
NOTEBOOKLM

Explore featured notebooks

Google has updated NotebookLM (www.snipca.com/55611), its AI-powered research and note-taking tool, with a set of 'featured' notebooks. These cover a range of topics, including health, science and economics, but the most interesting is 'William Shakespeare – the complete plays' (www.snipca.com/55612).

All the notebooks combine multiple sources and can be explored using NotebookLM's AI features. You can ask questions about their content, view a Mind Map that visualises the notebook's themes and listen to Audio Overviews (see screenshot below) that discuss topics in the style of a podcast.

We asked which animals are mentioned in Shakespeare's plays and NotebookLM gave us a species-by-species breakdown, with corresponding quotes.



GEMINI

Send messages and make calls in WhatsApp

The Google Gemini app for Android (www.snipca.com/55613) is now integrated with WhatsApp, allowing you to send messages and make calls directly through the AI tool. This only works if you have Gemini set as your phone's digital assistant, rather than Google Assistant.

Simply type @ in the message box and either select WhatsApp in the list that opens or type @WhatsApp (1 in our screenshot) and press Send. Tell Gemini who you want to message or call 2, and it will get the contact details from WhatsApp. You can then enter your message or make your call. Gemini can even help you compose the message.

Note that any messages you send through Gemini aren't protected by WhatsApp's end-to-end encryption, but Gemini can't read their content.

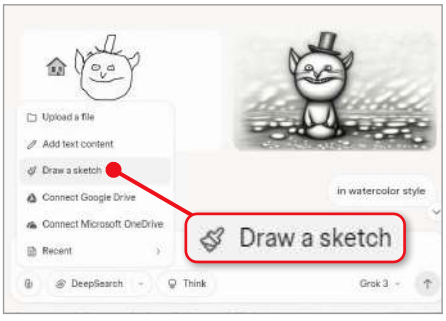
To remove the integration, tap your profile icon, choose Apps and switch off the setting for WhatsApp.

GROK

Turn your sketches into images

As well as generating images from text prompts and other images, Grok (www.grok.com) can now create them from sketches. This is handy if you're having trouble describing in words the picture you want it to produce.

Click the Create Images button below Grok's message box then the Attach icon (paperclip) and select 'Draw a sketch' (see screenshot below). Click the Send button and the AI tool will render your simple sketch as a detailed image. Enter a prompt such as 'in watercolour style' to refine the result.



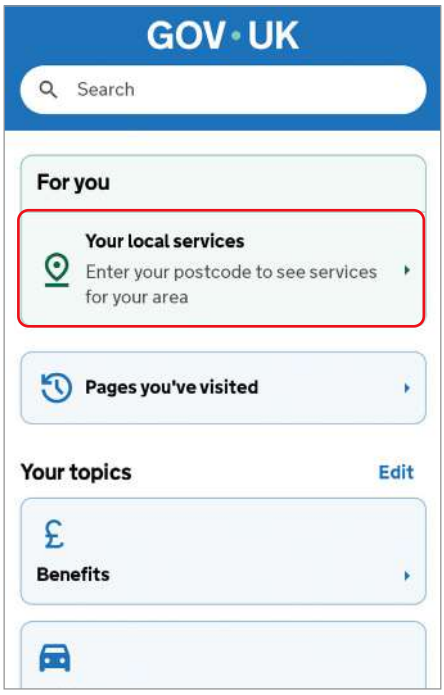
Phone and Tablet Tips

ANDROID & iOS

Try the Government's new Gov.uk app

The UK government has launched its long-awaited Gov.uk app (Android www.snipca.com/55614; iOS www.snipca.com/55615). It's currently a public beta, which means it doesn't yet have all the features planned for it and you may experience a few bugs.

Sign in with your Gov.uk One Login – or create one – and either allow or disallow 'statistics sharing'. You can then choose which topics you want to include on the app's home screen. These include Benefits for claiming and managing Universal Credit, 'Driving and transport' for DVLA information, and Retirement for pension advice.



Tap 'Your local services' (see screenshot below left) and enter your postcode to access info from your local council. You can also search across all Gov.uk articles to find specific advice.

The app is essentially a mobile version of the Gov.uk website, but it's easy to use and new tools and functionality will be added "over time". Inevitably these include an AI chatbot, called Gov.uk Chat, which is coming later this year.

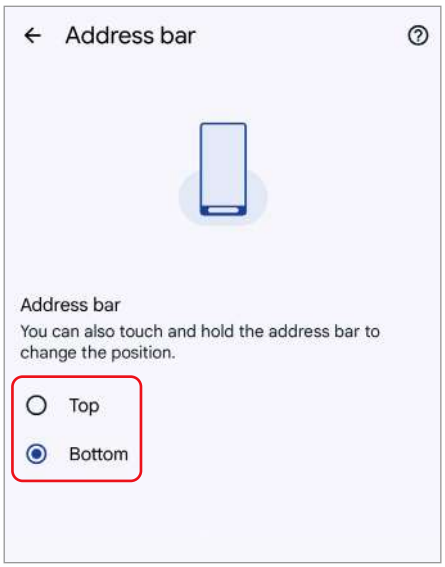
Note that the new app is separate from the existing Gov.uk One Login app (www.snipca.com/55633) for signing into government services.

ANDROID & iOS

Move Chrome's address bar to the bottom

Google has updated its Chrome browser for Android (www.snipca.com/55621) to let you move the address bar from the top of your screen to the bottom. This makes it easier to access with one hand, and is an option already offered by other browsers including Firefox, Edge and Vivaldi.

Previously (as we explained in Issue 713, page 44), moving the address bar required enabling an experimental 'flag', but it's now an official option. Simply long-press Chrome's address bar and tap 'Move address bar to the bottom' to relocate it to the foot of the browser. Long-press it again and choose 'Move address bar to the top' to shift it back.



Alternatively, tap Chrome's three-dot menu then Settings and select 'Address bar'. Choose either Top or Bottom from the options provided (see screenshot above). You can also move the address bar in the iOS version of Chrome (www.snipca.com/55622), but only on an iPhone not your iPad.

ANDROID

Lock private Firefox tabs with your fingerprint

Although your browser's private-browsing (or incognito) mode

BEST NEW APPS — What you should install this fortnight

Fossify Calculator

Free

Android www.snipca.com/55632

This free alternative to your phone's built-in Calculator app has no ads or trackers, and works entirely offline. You can customise its colour and that of its home-screen widget, and use its unit converter to calculate lengths, volumes and temperatures. Fossify Calculator is still in beta but it works very well.

Nextdoor

Free

Android www.snipca.com/55616

iOS www.snipca.com/55617

The social network for neighbourhoods has redesigned its mobile app and added several new features to its Search tab. These include real-time alerts for weather warnings, traffic problems, power outages and other community concerns; and a news feed showing the latest stories from trusted local-news sources.

PDFgear Scan

Free

Android www.snipca.com/55634

iOS www.snipca.com/55635

Our favourite free PDF editor has a new mobile app for digitising your paper documents. As well as scanning letters, contracts, receipts and other items to PDF format, PDFgear Scan can extract text using OCR, and crop, rotate and apply filters to your scans. It also has an AI assistant that answers questions about scanned content.

prevents your browsing history from being saved to your device, it doesn't stop nosy parkers peeking at your screen to see which sites you're privately visiting. To address this concern, Mozilla has updated the Android version of Firefox (www.snipca.com/55425) to let you lock your private tabs using your fingerprint, face or screen-lock PIN.

To activate this new feature, tap Firefox's three-dot menu and choose Settings then 'Private browsing'. Switch on the option 'Use screen lock to hide tabs in private browsing' and use your screen-lock method to confirm. Now no one but you will be able to unlock and view your private tabs.

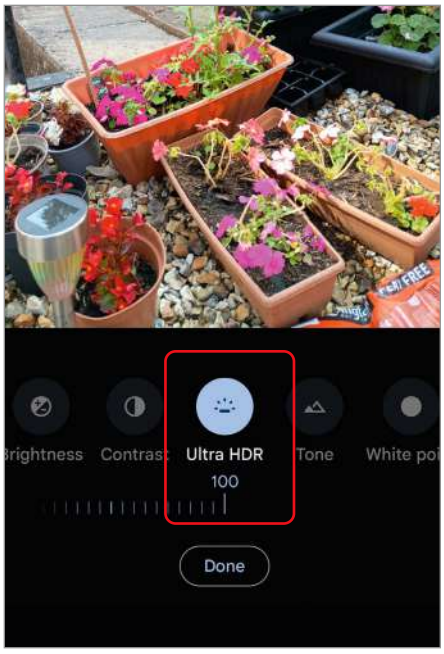
ANDROID

Upgrade Google Photos images to Ultra HDR

The Google Photos app for Android (www.snipca.com/55625) has a new Ultra HDR option, replacing the old HDR effect. This enhances the brightness level and colour of your photos, without increasing the image size, so they look more realistic on high-resolution screens.

To use the new option, open a picture in Google Photos and tap Edit, then Adjust. Select 'Ultra HDR' (see screenshot below) and use the slider to adjust the intensity of the effect. Tap 'Done' to save the result.

Google hasn't confirmed if Ultra HDR will be added to the iOS version of Google Photos (www.snipca.com/55626), which – at the time of writing – still has the old HDR option.

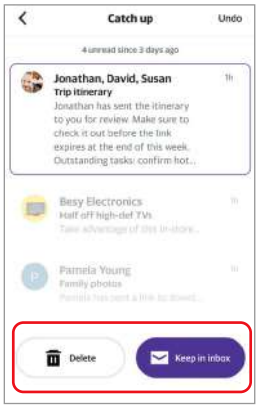


ANDROID & iOS

Manage unread emails in Yahoo Mail

Yahoo Mail (Android www.snipca.com/55630; iOS www.snipca.com/55631) has introduced an AI-powered feature called 'Catch up', which makes it easier to manage your unread emails.

The 'Catch up' screen lists messages you've received today but haven't yet opened, and provides AI summaries of their content. You can then tap 'Keep in inbox' or Delete (see screenshot left) to save or bin each email – tap Undo if you change your mind. Yahoo Mail will tell you how many messages you reviewed, and the time it took you.


Catch up
Undo
4 unread since 3 days ago
Jonathan, David, Susan
Trip itinerary
Jonathan has sent the itinerary to you for review. Make sure to check it out before the link expires at the end of this week. Outstanding tasks: confirm hot...
Besy Electronics
Half off high-def TVs
Pamela Young
Family photos
Delete
Keep in inbox

If you don't want 'Catch up' reminding you to review your unread emails every day, you can turn the feature off. Tap your profile icon top left in the Yahoo Mail app and choose Settings then Notifications. In the Topic section at the bottom, switch off the 'Catch up' option.

BEST APPS FOR... Following football

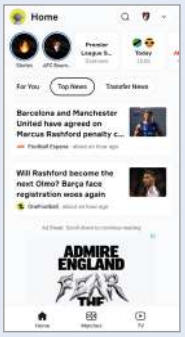
OneFootball

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/55640
iOS www.snipca.com/55641

OneFootball provides all the latest scores, news, transfer rumours and pre- and post-match analysis for your favourite football teams, leagues and players from around the world. You can stream some games live through the app (for a fee), as well as videos of highlights. Pay 99p month to remove ads (currently iOS only).

Best For Football news and rumours


Home
Barcelona and Manchester United have agreed on Marcus Rashford penalty c...
Will Rashford become the next Oleo? Barça face registration woes again
ADMIRE ENGLAND

Live Football on TV

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/55638
iOS www.snipca.com/55639

This app (called WheresTheMatch on iOS) tells you which channels, websites and streaming services you can watch upcoming matches on, and add them to your watchlist and calendar. It now covers 34 live sports, so use its filters to focus on football. You need to download and sync schedules before you start using the app.

Best For Watching live matches

FotMob

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/55645
iOS www.snipca.com/55646

FotMob offers live scores and match commentary for thousands of leagues, and in-depth statistics for serious football fans. These include line-ups and formations, player ratings and 'match momentum' graphs. You can also receive alerts for kick-off times, goals and red cards, and compete with friends to predict results.

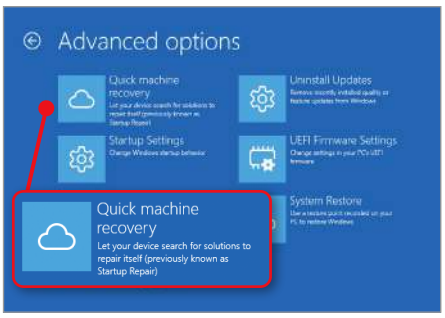
Best For Team and player statistics

*Contains in-app purchases

WINDOWS 11

Turn on 'Quick machine recovery' to fix boot problems

Microsoft has added a new 'Quick machine recovery' option to Windows 11. If your PC fails to boot and enters recovery mode, it can now automatically connect to Microsoft's servers to check for fixes – such as updated drivers or system updates – and apply them without you needing to do anything. It's turned on by default for Windows 11 Home users, but Pro users have to activate it by opening Settings then clicking System, Recovery, followed by 'Quick machine recovery' (see screenshot). Make sure your PC can connect to the internet during recovery, or it won't be able to fetch fixes.

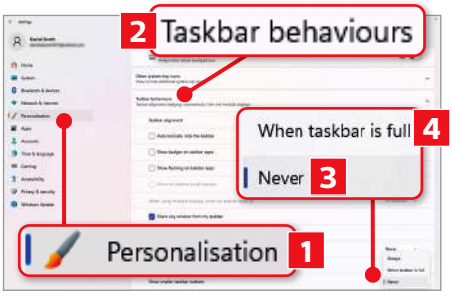

Advanced options
Quick machine recovery
Let your device search for solutions to repair itself (previously known as Startup Repair)
Uninstall Updates
Startup Settings
UEFI Firmware Settings
System Restore

WINDOWS 11

Stop Windows shrinking your taskbar icons

Microsoft's Patch Tuesday update for July (KB5062553) automatically shrinks your taskbar icons to create more space there. If you don't want it to do this, you'll need to disable the setting. Press Windows key+I to open Settings, then click Personalisation on the left (1 in our screenshot below).

Now click Taskbar on the right, followed by 'Taskbar behaviours' 2. Select the option 'Show smaller taskbar buttons', then click Never 3. If you prefer, you can choose the compromise option to shrink icons 'When taskbar is full' 4.



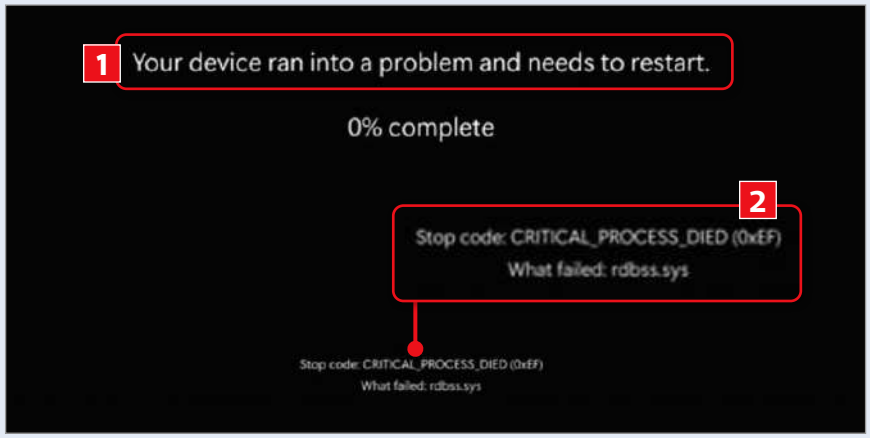
WINDOWS 11

Don't be confused by the new Black Screen of Death

After nearly 30 years, Microsoft has replaced its Blue Screen of Death (BSoD) with a new black screen. Like its blue predecessor, it appears when your computer crashes and needs to be rebooted. However, it lacks the sad 'smiley' face to indicate something has gone wrong, and the QR code you could scan to seek advice from Microsoft.

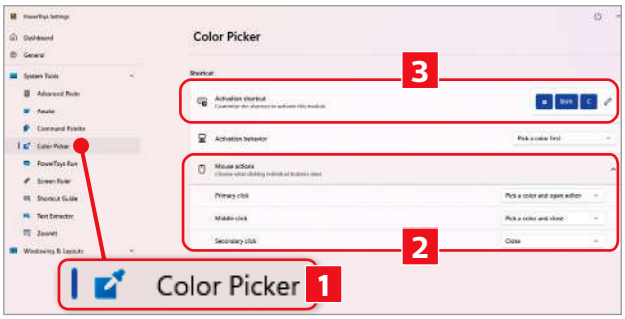
The company claims this simpler screen fits better with Windows 11's overall design, but at a glance it could be easily confused with the black Windows' screen that appears when you install an update. This has a spinning circle and shows as a percentage how much of your update has been installed.

When you next see a black screen, pay close attention to the message on it. If it reports that a problem has occurred (1 in our screenshot) and shows a Stop Code error at the bottom 2, then you'll know it's the new-look Black Screen of Death. In Windows 10 the Blue Screen of Death will remain as it is.


1 Your device ran into a problem and needs to restart.
0% complete
2
Stop code: CRITICAL_PROCESS_DIED (0xEF)
What failed: rdbss.sys
Stop code: CRITICAL_PROCESS_DIED (0xEF)
What failed: rdbss.sys

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Choose what mouse buttons do in Color Picker



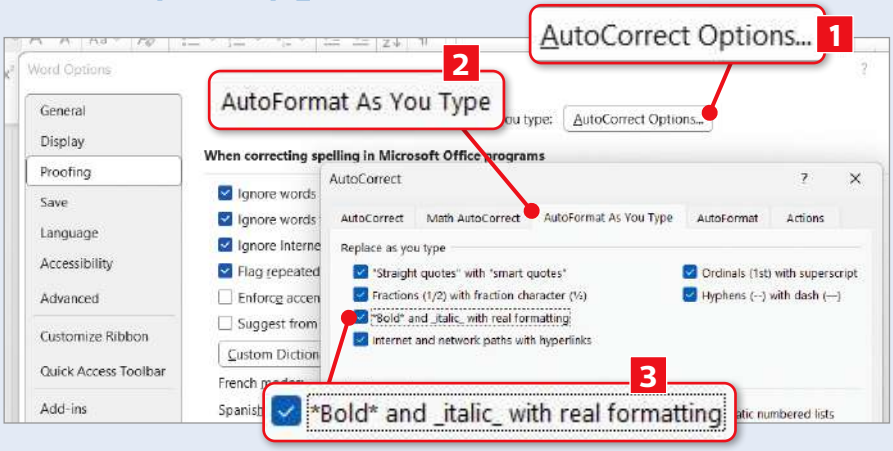
Color Picker in PowerToys is a simple but powerful tool that helps you identify and copy colours from anywhere on your screen. When you hover your mouse pointer over any pixel on your screen, it instantly shows you the exact colour code. You can then copy that code in various formats like HEX, RGB or HSL to help with design work, such as building websites, personalising desktops, editing images and more.

Version 0.92 of PowerToys, released in July, lets you select which actions your mouse buttons perform. First, open PowerToys and click System Tools at the top left followed by Color Picker (1 in our screenshot above). Next, on the right, click 'Mouse actions' and choose options for your Primary (left mouse button), Middle and Secondary (right) click. The options for each click are 'Pick a color and open editor', 'Pick a color and close' and simply 'Close' 2. You can also change the keyboard shortcut that opens the Color Picker – click the blue keys in 'Activation shortcut' 3 then press the combination of keys you want.

MICROSOFT WORD

Bold and italicise words as you type

Word has a setting that automatically changes words to bold and italics as you type. Click File at the top, Options then Proofing. Now click AutoCorrect Options (1 in our screenshot), then the AutoFormat As You Type tab 2 and tick '*Bold* and _italic_ with real formatting' 3. Click OK. From now, words you type with asterisks on either side will instantly change to bold, while words with underscores on either side will change to italics.

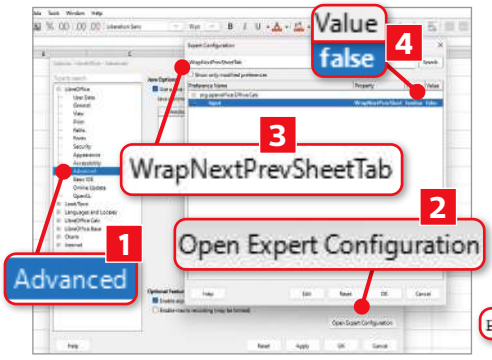


LIBREOFFICE CALC

Turn off spreadsheet wrapping

In previous versions of LibreOffice Calc, when you pressed Ctrl+Page Down or Ctrl+Page Up the cursor moved to the next or previous sheet, but stopped dead when you reached the last or first sheet. This changed in version 25.2, released in February, so that Calc wraps around, jumping from the last sheet back to the first (or from the first to the last) when you keep pressing those shortcuts. This is useful if you regularly work with lots of sheets and want to keep your fingers on the keyboard without having to manually jump back.

However, you might not like this because it can overshoot your intended sheet, making it harder to know exactly when you've reached the start or end of your spreadsheet. To turn it off, click Tools at the top followed by Options (or press Alt+F12). Next, click LibreOffice in the menu on the left followed by Advanced (1 in our screenshot below). Finally, click the Open Expert Configuration button 2, type WrapNextPrevSheetTab 3, press Enter, then click the Input line so the Value turns False 4. Click OK to confirm.



MICROSOFT EXCEL

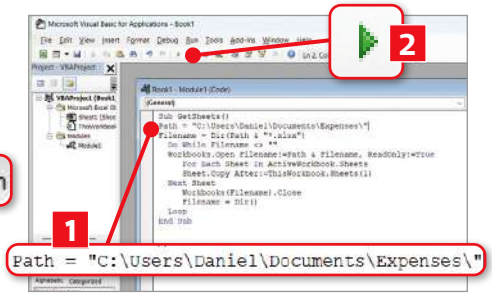
Merge files automatically using a macro

If you regularly need to combine several Excel files, it's quicker to use a macro than manually copying and pasting them. First, turn on Excel's Developer tab by clicking File, Options followed by Customise Ribbon, then tick the Developer box on the right followed by OK.

Next, move all the files you want to combine into a single folder and save them in the XLSX format. Now open a new Excel file as your master file. Click the Developer tab at the top, then Visual Basic. Now click Insert at the top followed by Module. This opens the VBA editor.

Now visit our Pastebin page (www.snipca.com/55505) and cut the copy from it, then paste it into the VBA editor. Now find the line Path = "C:\YOUR\FOLDER\PATH\" and replace it with the file path for the folder containing the Excel files you want to combine – for example, Path = "C:\Users\Daniel\Documents\Expenses\" (1 in our screenshot below).

Finally, click the green Run button 2 (or press F5) to run the macro. Excel will open each file in the folder, copy all the sheets inside it, and paste them into your master spreadsheet. Once it's finished, close the VBA editor and don't forget to save your file.



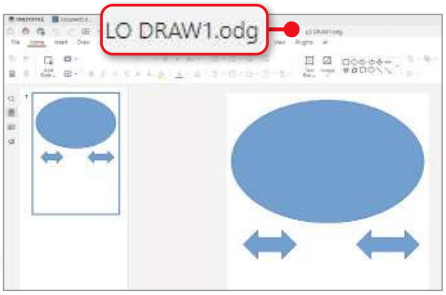
ONLYOFFICE

Open more file formats without converting

OnlyOffice 9, released in June, works with four new file formats, so you can open them without having to convert them first. The most useful is '.xlsb' for Binary Workbooks in Excel. These store data in binary format rather than the XML-based format in '.xlsx' files, making large spreadsheets faster to open and save.

You can now also open '.md' files, used by note-taking tools like Obsidian and Joplin. These are plain-text documents that use simple formatting codes (such as # for headings or * for bullet points).

Support for '.vsdx' files means OnlyOffice can now open diagrams created in Visio (www.snipca.com/55501), Microsoft's software for creating flowcharts and floor plans. Similarly, support for '.odg' means you can open files created in Draw, LibreOffice's vector-graphics program (see screenshot below).



In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Use Teamup as your shared calendar

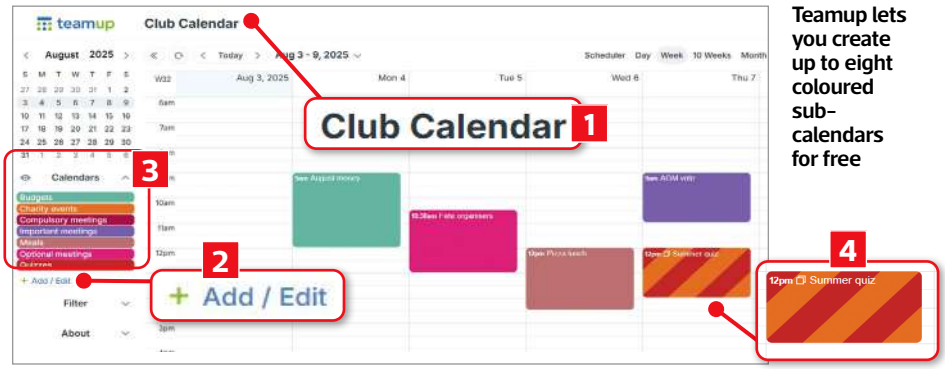
Running a local club means keeping your members – and yourself – on top of upcoming dates and events: meetings, venue bookings, deadlines and so on. You can do some of this via group chats or email threads. But even the most organised among us would be lost without some kind of calendar tool.

A shared Google Calendar might seem like the most obvious option, as it sends notifications to remind members of events. And any changes – such as rescheduled events – are all updated in real time, so everyone always knows what's happening. The catch is that members need a Google account, and not all will have – or want – one.

Teamup (www.teamup.com) is a terrific alternative. The free version has most of the features of Google Calendar, but with one big advantage; your members won't need a Google account – or, indeed, *any* kind of account – to view a shared calendar.

You can set up a central club calendar and share it as a single web link with an unlimited number of members. You can also create up to eight colour-coded sub-calendars (for birthdays, specific events and more), send notifications of any changes and set up recurring events.

Members can access the calendar via any web browser or by using the Teamup mobile app – all without needing to remember a password.



Teamup lets you create up to eight coloured sub-calendars for free

Create your coloured sub-calendars

Visit https://teamup.com/calendars then under 'Create a Calendar', enter a name for your calendar and your email address, then select your language and time zone. Choose the Standard template to start with, then under Subscription Plan select 'Basic (free)'. Accept the terms of service, then click Create.

You'll be sent an email – click the link and complete the form to create a password and set up your Teamup account. Click the Continue button and you'll be taken to your calendar.

After creating your first calendar you'll see its name at the top (1 in our screenshot above). On the left you'll see your first sub-calendar listed in purple, plus an entry on the right called 'Getting Started Guide & How to Share Your Calendar'. Right-click this and click Delete.

Now click 'Add/Edit' 2 then the pen edit icon next to the calendar it created by default. Rename it and either stick with purple or choose a new colour. Save to confirm. Now click 'Add/Edit' and repeat for as many sub-calendars as you need (you get eight for free). These will appear under the Calendars heading 3.

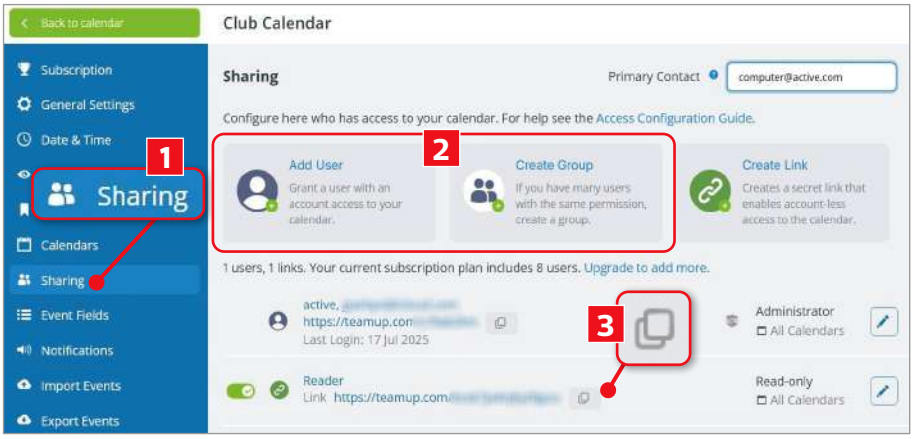
Now select where in the calendar you want to add an event. Give it a name and click Calendar, then choose which sub-calendar (ie, which colour) it will appear as. If you choose more than one sub-calendar it will appear multicoloured 4.

Share your calendar with members

Now click the three horizontal lines top right followed by Settings, then Sharing on the left (1 in our screenshot below left). You can now add users or create groups 2 if you want to add members with the same read/write permissions as you (up to eight for free).

However, it's more likely you'll want them to see a read-only version of the calendar. To do that, click the 'Copy to clipboard' icon 3 next to the Reader link and paste it into a group email or message to send to your members.

When your members receive the link, they can simply click or tap it to open the calendar in their web browser, without having to log in. Or they can install the free Teamup Calendar app (Android www.snipca.com/55587; iOS www.snipca.com/55588) on their phone or tablet. They need to tap 'Continue without account' at the bottom of the app's home screen, then paste the link you sent into the box.



Decide which permissions to give your members, then copy the link to share your calendar

Next issue: Check if your club's site has been hacked

What's All the Fuss About...

Qi2.2

Wireless charging should get much faster – but don't ditch your cables just yet

What is it?

The latest version of the wireless charging standard Qi (pronounced 'chee'). It was approved in April and the first devices are now starting to arrive.

Wireless? So you don't need any cables?

Correct. Wireless charging has been around since 2009 when the Wireless Power Consortium (WPC) introduced Qi. But it took until 2012 for phone manufacturers to make phones that could be charged wirelessly.

How does it work?

Magnetic induction. Wireless chargers have a coil of wire. When you switch it on, it sends a current through that coil, creating an invisible magnetic field. Your phone has a matching coil. Put the two close enough together, and that magnetic field induces a current in your phone's coil. That current is turned into electricity, which tops up your battery.

Sounds great. Does it charge faster than cables?

No – and that's held back its uptake. At launch it could only charge at five watts (W), which would take all night to refill your phone's battery. It had reached 15W when Qi2.0 arrived in 2023, but that's still less than half the speed of most wired chargers. It's why many people still prefer to charge their phones with cables. Yet Qi2.2 might change all that.

This logo indicates Qi2.0 and a top charging power of 15W

Why? Is it more powerful?

Yes. Qi2.2 raises the maximum to 50W without overheating – fast enough to charge a phone in under one hour.

But will most chargers hit that speed?

No. Samsung is building a 50W charging processor, but most Qi2.2 chargers won't exceed 25W. That's still a decent increase, however, and should charge phones in under 90 minutes. Just as important is Qi2.2's improved magnetic alignment – inspired by Apple's MagSafe chargers – which uses built-in magnets to ensure your phone and charger line up perfectly every time.

Is that a problem in existing wireless chargers?

Yes. Even placing your phone a few millimetres off can drop charging speeds drastically or stop charging altogether. That defeats the supposed convenience of wireless charging, which is being able to plonk your phone down and walk away. That's why older chargers often need careful placement or a little 'wiggling' to get a good charge.

But how is that more convenient than using a wired charger?

Not everyone thinks it is. You still have to find the wireless charging pad, just like you need to find a plug socket with wired chargers. But that's not an issue if the charger is fixed in place – on your desk or bedside table, or in the car – so you always know where it is. And Qi2.0 made magnetic alignment the same across all chargers, making it easier for manufacturers to build devices.

So can I buy Qi2.2 chargers already?

Well, soon. Ugreen's MagFlow Magnetic Power Bank (pictured above left), for example, should be on sale in the autumn and charges up to 25W. Anker has announced a Qi2.2 version of its popular 3-in-1 Prime stand (above), while Belkin says it's working on "quite a few" Qi2.2 products. And Apple will add support for MagSafe too.

You can check all Qi-compatible chargers on the WPC's site: www.snipca.com/55675. There's no new logo for it, but all approved chargers will have the existing Qi2.0 branding (pictured left).

But presumably your phone would need to be compatible too?

Correct – and very few are. Apple's next iPhones are expected to support Qi2.2 when iOS 26 rolls out this autumn, but it hasn't confirmed this. Android brands like Samsung, Google and OnePlus are tipped to follow. Qi2.2 is backwards compatible so it'll work on older phones, but your charging speed will be limited to what the phone can handle. Wireless will be the future eventually, but you might want to keep some cables handy for now.

Stop Wasting Your USB STICK!

You can use your USB stick to do so much more than move files between PCs. Robert Irvine explains 14 superb new ways to get the most from its storage and transfer speeds

USB sticks have shrunk in physical size as they've grown in capacity. That's probably why nobody calls them 'thumb drives' any more – 'half-your-little-finger drives' would be more accurate. However, it's not just the tiny size of USB sticks that makes them easy to overlook. Many of us buy them to transfer files from one computer to another, then leave these versatile portable devices languishing in a drawer.

Even if you regularly plug in your USB stick, you probably use only a fraction of its available storage. With the latest drives offering capacities of up to 2TB and super-fast USB 3.2 connectivity, there's a lot of storage space and speed potential going to waste. What's more, USB sticks are now cheaper than ever – you can buy a 128GB model from Amazon for less than a tenner – so it's a shame not to make the most of these handy little devices.

In this feature, we reveal 14 new ways to unlock the full potential of your USB stick, so you can use it for much more than transporting files. We provide step-by-step instructions for useful tasks such as booting a free portable version of Windows 11, locking your PC with a USB security key and running a powerful AI chatbot from your portable drive. Some tips require you to reformat your stick, so ensure you back up your data first.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Run Windows 11 on any PC without overwriting Windows 10
- Switch easily between multiple versions of Linux
- Test new software safely in a USB-stick sandbox
- Create an emergency rescue kit to fix a malfunctioning PC
- Scan for malware threats using cloud-based AI
- Carry a powerful AI assistant in your pocket
- Stream music and videos from a media server
- Store passwords securely in a portable vault

Stop Wasting Your USB STICK!

TRY NEW OPERATING SYSTEMS & SOFTWARE

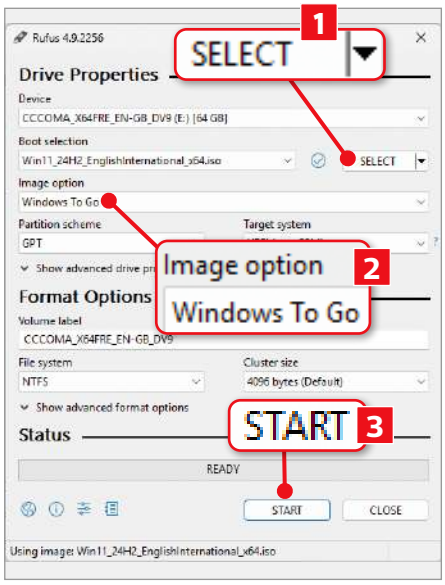
1 Boot a portable version of Windows 11

There are several benefits to creating a bootable version of Windows 11 on a USB stick. You can run the operating system on your current PC without overwriting Windows 10 (until you're ready), use it to access your files and software on other PCs, and potentially bypass Microsoft's restrictions for upgrading to Windows 11.

The latest ISO file for Windows 11 is 5.7GB in size, so you need a USB stick with a capacity of at least 16GB. An 8GB drive may have enough storage for the ISO, but you need extra space for boot files, Windows updates and any files and programs you add and download to the bootable version of the operating system. Newer USB sticks with speedy connectivity (USB 3.0 or later) will ensure the portable OS runs almost as smoothly as it would on your main hard drive.

To download the Windows 11 ISO, go to Microsoft's Download Windows 11 page (www.snipca.com/55673). In the 'Download Windows 11 Disk Image (ISO)' section, select 'Windows 11 multi-edition ISO' in the dropdown menu and click Download Now. Once your request has been verified, choose English International as the product language and click Confirm. Click '64-bit Download' to save the ISO file to your PC.

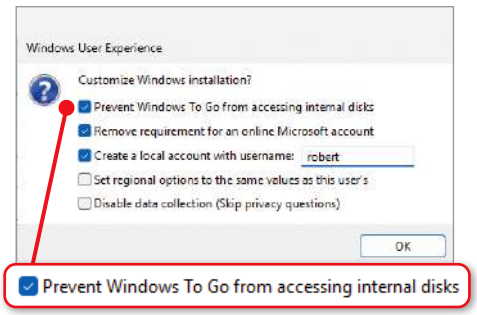
To make this version of Windows 11 bootable, download and run the brilliant free program Rufus (www.snipca.com/55674). Insert your USB stick and click Select (1 in our screenshot above right). Open the ISO file you downloaded, choose Windows To Go in the 'Image option' menu 2 and click Start 3.



Use Rufus to create a bootable version of Windows 11 on a USB stick

Select the version of Windows you want to install and, in the Windows User Experience box that opens, ensure you tick the option 'Prevent Windows To Go from accessing internal disks' (see screenshot above right). This will stop you overwriting Windows 10 or your current installation of Windows 11. You can also remove the requirement for an online Microsoft account and use a local one instead.

If you want to upgrade an unsupported Windows 10 PC, rather than create a portable version of Windows 11, choose 'Standard Windows installation' in the 'Image option' menu. Select 'Remove requirement for 4GB+ RAM, Secure Boot and TPM 2.0' in the Windows User Experience box. We'll explain more about this upgrade method in our upcoming 'Windows 10 survival guide' (out on Wednesday 10 September).


Windows User Experience
Customize Windows installation?
Prevent Windows To Go from accessing internal disks
Remove requirement for an online Microsoft account
Create a local account with username:
robert
Set regional options to the same values as this user's
Disable data collection (Skip privacy questions)
OK
Prevent Windows To Go from accessing internal disks

Stop the portable version of Windows making changes to your PC

Click 'OK' to install the ISO file to the USB stick and create a bootable OS. This takes about 20 minutes – click Close when done. You'll now need to change the PC's boot order to use your USB stick rather than an internal drive – see the box below left for instructions. This will boot Windows 11 from your USB stick and connect to your home network. The portable operating system will check for and install the latest updates and let you configure your privacy settings. Unplug the USB stick and restart your PC to revert to your usual Windows installation.

2 Switch between multiple Linux distros

As we explained in our 'Should you ditch Windows 10 for Linux?' feature in Issue 711 (page 60), there are lots of Linux distributions (distros) to choose from, with different interfaces and features. You can run them instead of Windows 10 when support ends in October. A large-capacity USB stick – preferably at least 64GB – gives you enough space to install multiple distros, so you can decide which version is best for you, or switch between them. When run from your USB stick, they won't interfere with each other or with your Windows installation.

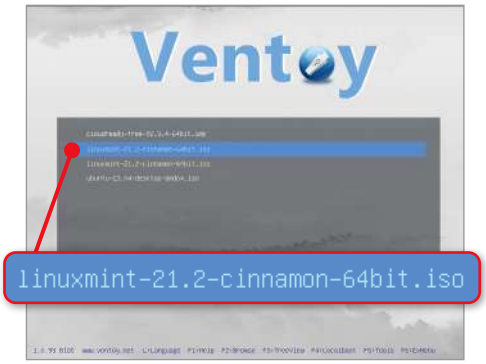
The easiest way to install multiple Linux distros on a single USB stick is to use the free tool Ventoy (www.snipca.com/55677). This multiboot USB creator saves you having to format or partition the drive each time you copy an ISO file to it, and lists ISOs in a menu so you can choose which one to boot.

Download the Ventoy ZIP file from www.snipca.com/55678, extract its contents and double-click the Ventoy2Disk.exe file. Ensure your USB stick is listed in the Device menu and

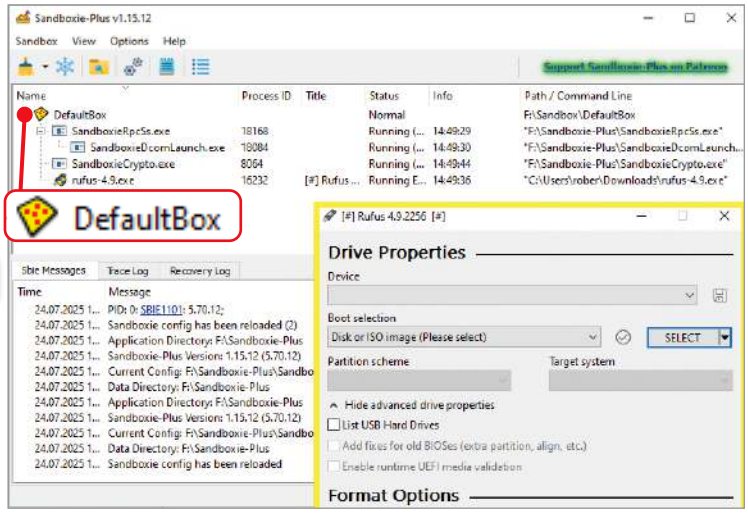
Boot directly from your USB stick

Some of our tips involve booting from a USB stick rather than your hard drive or SSD. This requires you to change your PC's boot order through the UEFI/BIOS. The steps to access the boot menu vary between PCs, but it usually involves pressing F1, F2, F8, F10, Esc or Del after restarting, then looking for 'Boot order' or something similar.

An easier way to boot from USB is to use the Windows Recovery Environment – also known as 'Advanced startup'. Open the Settings app and click 'Update & security' (in Windows 10) or System (in Windows 11) then Recovery. Click the 'Restart now' button in the 'Advanced start-up' section to load the Windows Recovery Environment. On the 'Choose an option' screen, select 'Use a device' and click USB Device or USB Storage (see screenshot).



Ventoy stores multiple Linux distros on a USB stick so you can choose which to boot



Sandboxie Plus runs software in a secure sandbox on your USB stick

click Install. This will format the drive and rename it Ventoy. Close the Ventoy program window, then open the Ventoy USB drive in a File Explorer window.

You can now download some Linux distros to add to the drive. Popular options include Linux Mint (Cinnamon Edition, www.snipca.com/55679), Zorin OS (free Core version, www.snipca.com/55680), Ubuntu Desktop (www.snipca.com/55681) and the privacy-focused Tails (www.snipca.com/55682). The downloads are usually ISO disk images and can be a few gigabytes in size, which is why you need a large USB stick.

Once you've downloaded a distro ISO, drag it from your Downloads folder to the Ventoy USB drive, but don't open the file. Restart your PC to boot from the USB stick (see instructions on page 51) and Ventoy will launch, displaying the name of the Linux ISO. Any other distros you copy to the Ventoy drive will also be listed on this menu screen. Select a Linux distro (see screenshot above) to try it, but be careful not to install it on your PC.

Windows' Secure Boot feature may cause a 'security violation' message. To fix this, press Enter followed by any key except Enter, and select 'Enroll key from disk'. Press Enter again, choose VTOYUEFI and select ENROLL_THIS_KEY_IN_MOKMANAGER.cer, pressing Enter after each step. Choose 'Continue' then Yes followed by Reboot. Boot from the USB stick again, and this time Ventoy will load your Linux distro(s).

3 Test software safely in a sandbox

If you want to try a new program but you're worried it will make unwanted changes to your system – or even infect it with malware – running it in a sandbox is a sensible precaution. Limiting that sandbox to a USB stick is even safer, because it further isolates the program from your system.

The best free sandboxing tool is Sandboxie Plus (www.snipca.com/55693), which was recently updated to offer better support for testing portable programs. And while it's not strictly a portable program, you can run it from a USB stick. Download the Sandboxie-Plus EXE file from www.snipca.com/55695 and double-click it to run the installer. Select 'Extract all files to a directory for portable use' and choose your USB stick as the destination folder.

Once all the files have extracted to your USB stick, double-click SandMan.exe and click OK to let Sandoxie Plus create the 'necessary services' for its portable mode. If you get an error message, click the Sandbox menu and choose Maintenance then Connect, and click Yes.

To run a program in a sandbox, drag its EXE file into the Sandboxie Plus window. You can also right-click it and choose Run Sandboxed. If you don't see that option, click the Options menu, select Global Settings and in the Shell Integration section tick 'Add 'Run Sandboxed' to the explorer context menu'.

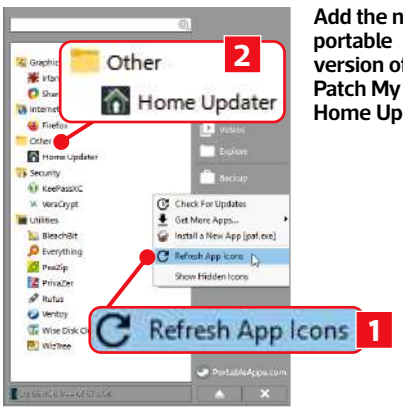
Either add the program to your DefaultBox (see screenshot above) or create a new sandbox, and click Yes when you see the Sandbox Start prompt. The sandboxed tool will run with a yellow border around its window. Anything it does will remain confined to the sandbox and your USB stick.

4 Store and update hundreds of programs

Many *Computeractive* readers will be familiar with the fantastic software suite PortableApps.com (www.snipca.com/55699), which offers portable versions of over a thousand programs and games. Pick the tools you want from its Portable App Directory, then click Install to save them all to your USB drive. PortableApps.com will check for updates to these tools every time you launch it.

To find useful apps and games more easily, and make the most of your USB stick's capacity, click Apps in the PortableApps.com pop-up menu and choose Get More Apps. You can sort the list by title, category – including 'Graphics and Pictures', 'Music and Video', Internet, Office and Utilities – or new releases. Each tool's entry includes details of its download and install size.

You can also add your own USB tools to the suite, such as the new portable version of Patch My PC Home Updater (see our Workshop in Issue 712, page 38). Create a new folder in the PortableApps folder on your USB stick (not the PortableApps.com folder) and give it a suitable name such as 'Extra tools'. Drag the EXE files for portable software into this folder. Open the PortableApps.com menu and choose Apps then Refresh App Icons (1 in our screenshot below). The new program will appear in an Other category 2, where you can launch it as you would the other tools. However, PortableApps.com won't update programs you add yourself – you'll need to do that manually.



Add the new portable version of Patch My PC Home Updater

FIX & PROTECT YOUR PC FOR FREE

5 Create an emergency rescue kit

Turning a USB stick into an emergency rescue kit can help you fix PC problems when Windows won't start or isn't working properly, and could even save you money on professional repairs. There are several advanced tools for this purpose, such as Hiren's BootCD PE (www.hirensbootcd.org), but the easiest to use is Lazesoft Recovery Suite Home Edition (www.snipca.com/55684). It's free for personal use and was recently updated with enhanced support for Windows 11.

The program gives you full access to a malfunctioning or non-bootable PC and fixes many common problems. Select 'Burn CD/USB Disk' on the home screen (1 in our screenshot right), specify your Windows version and choose USB Flash. Click 'Start' to create your emergency rescue kit.

To access the repair kit, boot your PC from your USB stick and choose Lazesoft Live CD on the start-up screen. Click the Windows Recovery module 2 and select the drive you're having problems with.

Lazesoft's recovery tools include options for fixing the causes of crashes, performing a system restore, copying important data to another external drive and repairing corrupted system files. Click the One Click Fix tab – recommended for 'novice users' – to check for and fix common Windows boot errors.

Note that Lazesoft Recovery Suite won't work if BitLocker encryption is enabled on your PC, and the free version can't fix the 'bootmgr is missing' error.

Lazesoft Recovery Suite creates an emergency rescue kit on your USB stick

6 Lock your PC with a security key

Many websites and apps now let you protect your online accounts with a USB security key such as a Yubico YubiKey (www.snipca.com/55696). Although a standard USB stick can't replicate that type of two-factor authentication (2FA) because it lacks the required security chip, you can use one as a key to lock and unlock your PC. This will stop anyone but you accessing your system.

Download the free tool USB Raptor (www.snipca.com/55697), extract the contents of its ZIP file and run the installer. If it triggers a SmartScreen security warning, click 'More info' then 'Run anyway' – it's safe to use.

Also click Allow to let it through the Windows Firewall, if prompted.

When the program opens, enter a password to encrypt your USB stick and click 'Create k3y file' (1 in screenshot below). This file contains encrypted text USB Raptor reads to unlock a computer. Tick 'Enable USB Raptor' 2 and click Close.

Unplug your USB stick and your PC will lock and display a blank green screen. Plug it back in to unlock your PC. Click 'Advanced configuration' in USB Raptor's top-right corner to customise its behaviour, such as by running it on Windows startup, turning off your screen when locked and disabling or changing the locking and unlocking sounds.

USB Raptor lets you lock and unlock your PC using your USB stick

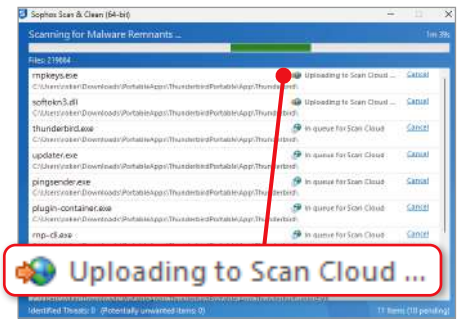
7 Scan for malware using AI

As antivirus software has to keep its virus definitions up to date and provide real-time protection, it needs to be installed on your PC. However, you can still run extra security tools from a USB stick for added peace of mind.

Sophos Scan & Clean (www.snipca.com/55717) is one of the best free options, combining a simple design with fast, thorough scans. It uses cloud-based AI (see screenshot below) to detect malware, including zero-day threats, rootkits and PUPs. You can then either delete or quarantine anything it finds.

Copy its EXE file to your USB drive and double-click it to launch the program and start a scan – there's no need to install it. Sophos Scan & Clean updates automatically each time you run it.

Sophos asks you to enter a name and email address to download Scan & Clean, but you can use fake details because the company doesn't verify them.



Sophos Scan & Clean detects and removes malware using cloud-based AI

Computer active

READER OFFER!

ADD A DISC FOR £5.95

Upgrade to Windows 11 Pro for just £49.99!

Your PC almost certainly came with Windows 11 Home. But did you know it's easy to upgrade to **Windows 11 Pro** to get advanced features like BitLocker drive encryption?

There's no need to install a new version of Windows – just take your new Professional key, go to System, Activate, then select 'Change Product Key'.

To upgrade, visit **www.snipca.com/50563** and click the red **Buy Now** button on the right.

JUST SO YOU KNOW...

This offer can be used by one person only, and expires at midnight on **26 August, 2025**. It's a lifetime licence for one computer.

ACCESS AI TOOLS & EMAIL ON THE GO

8 Carry an AI chatbot in your pocket

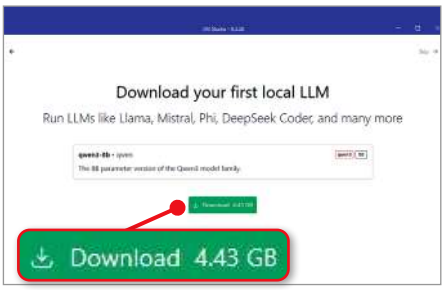
Although you can chat to your favourite AI assistant in your browser or its mobile app – or on your PC if it has a Windows version – there are advantages to running a chatbot from a USB stick. The details of your chats won't be stored on your PC or phone, you may be able to use the AI tool offline – so your data stays private rather than being uploaded to cloud servers – and you can access the chatbot on any computer you plug your stick into.

ChatGPT, Gemini and the other leading AI assistants don't have portable versions, but you can run large language models (LLMs) from your USB stick using the free LM Studio (www.snipca.com/55710). You'll need a large-capacity USB stick because, while LM Studio only takes up around 800MB of storage, the LLMs are massive – from 4GB to 20GB in size. It's also essential that your drive is fast so the chatbot can process and respond to your requests quickly (it will still be slower than chatting in your browser or an app).

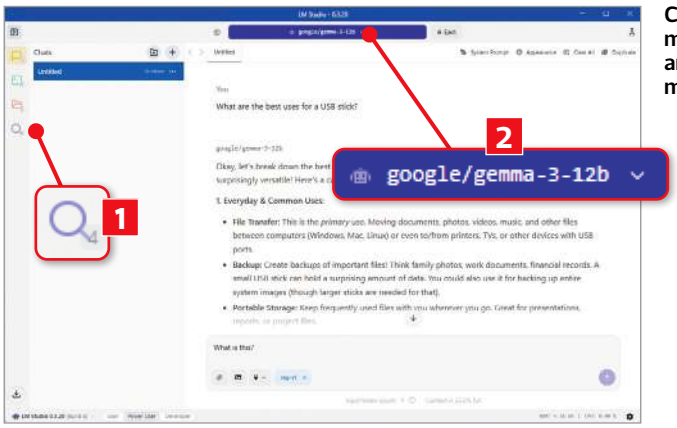
To run LM Studio from your USB stick, download its EXE file to your PC and install the program to a folder on your portable drive. Once installed, tick 'Run LM Studio' and click Finish, or double-click the 'LM Studio.exe' file in the software's folder.

Click 'Let's get started' and select Power User on the 'Choose your level' screen. You can now download an LLM (see screenshot below). LM Studio will suggest the most suitable model for your drive. Untick the box 'Enable local LLM service on login' because this runs that chatbot automatically when you log into your PC, so it won't work on a USB stick.

Once the download is complete, click Load Model and start chatting. Depending on the LLM, you may be able to upload files and images for analysis. You can download more language models by clicking the Discover icon (1 in our screenshot above). These include Mistral, DeepSeek (a private version that won't collect your data) and Gemma, which is built by Google and uses the same AI technology as Gemini.



Download an AI model to LM Studio to run a chatbot from your USB stick



Chat to the AI tool in the main LM Studio window and download more models

Switch between the models you've downloaded by clicking the menu at the top of LM Studio's interface 2. Click Eject to unload an LLM. Most of them work offline, and your conversations will be confined to your USB drive. Plug the stick into another PC to launch LM Studio without needing to install the software.

By default, LM Studio saves models to the current PC rather than your USB stick, so you would need to download them again when using another computer. To make the LLMs portable, click the My Models icon in the sidebar and change the Models Directory to a dedicated folder on your USB stick (not the LM Studio installation folder). You can add LLMs you've already downloaded by copying the 'lmstudio-community' folder from C:/Users/[username]/.lmstudio/hub/models to the new folder.

When you run LM Studio on a new PC, click the Power User tab then Discover, and change the My Models Directory to the folder on your USB stick. This will load the language models you previously downloaded to the portable drive.

9 Access your email securely on any PC

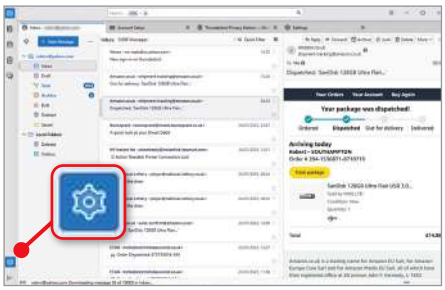
You might question the need for a portable email program – after all, you can access your inbox in your browser, as well as in your email provider's mobile app. But sending and receiving messages on a PC other than your own is a security risk, while composing emails on a phone is fiddlier than using a proper keyboard.

A USB stick offers a safe and convenient way to carry your messages everywhere you go, and read and reply to them on a big screen. The only effective way to set this up is through PortableApps.com, which offers a portable and regularly updated edition of Mozilla Thunderbird (www.snipca.com/55716). It's the only reliable portable email client that's still updated.

You can add your Gmail, Outlook or Yahoo Mail account to the program to access your emails, folders and contacts, or import the data from another email client, including an existing installation of Thunderbird. The portable tool will check for new emails automatically.

You'll be able to store many years' worth of messages on a large-capacity USB stick (if you choose POP3 rather than IMAP as the account type), so make sure Thunderbird saves them to the portable drive and not your PC. Click the Settings cog (see screenshot below) and choose Account Settings then Local Folders. In the Message Storage section, click the Browse button next to Local Directory and either choose or create a folder on your USB stick.

Thunderbird Portable supports end-to-end encryption to keep your messages private. To activate this and generate an OpenPGP key on your USB stick, select End-To-End Encryption in Account Settings.



Thunderbird Portable is now the only email client designed for USB sticks

ENHANCE YOUR PHOTOS, VIDEOS & MUSIC

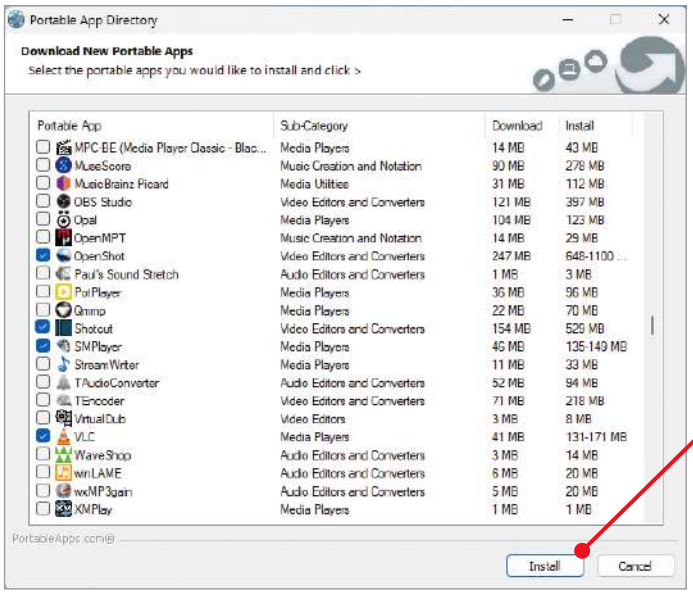
10 Store higher-quality photos and videos

A USB stick with 64GB or more of storage is invaluable for photographers and video makers. As well as giving you the space to back up thousands of images and videos, it lets you save them at high quality, rather than compress files to save storage.

The free program RawTherapee Portable, available through PortableApps.com (www.snipca.com/55720) and its own website (www.snipca.com/55721), runs from a USB stick so you can edit photos without losing quality and maintain their true colour and dynamic range. If you find the program too complicated, the excellent and easy-to-use image editor PhotoDemon is another option available through PortableApps.com (www.snipca.com/55722), as is our favourite free image viewer IrfanView (www.snipca.com/55723). These offer the same features and updates as their desktop versions and give you a portable photo-editing toolkit you can use on any computer, without installing anything.

Similarly, you can store and edit large videos with 4K resolutions and high frame rates on your USB stick by using portable tools. The brilliant free video editors Shotcut (www.snipca.com/55724) and OpenShot (www.snipca.com/55725) are available through PortableApps.com, as is the popular media player VLC (www.snipca.com/55726).

All these programs have been updated recently, making them even more powerful tools for your stick. Locate them in the 'Music and Video' section of the Portable App Directory, and image-editing programs in the 'Graphics and Pictures' section, then click Install to add them to your USB stick. If you also want to edit audio files, you can download the superb free audio editor Audacity (www.snipca.com/55736) through PortableApps.com, too.



Create a portable toolkit for editing high-quality photos and videos on your USB stick

11 Record live TV from your smart TV

Set-top boxes for recording TV shows are increasingly hard to come by, but you can potentially turn a USB stick into a personal video recorder (PVR). You'll need a TV with a built-in recording function – as most smart TVs have now – and a portable drive with a big enough capacity (at least 64GB) to store lots of programmes. Ideally it should be USB 3.0 or faster for seamless recording.

First you'll need to format the USB stick through your TV so it can support and play video files. The formatting process and file system – such as NTFS, FAT32 or exFAT – will differ between TV makes and models, but you should find help on the manufacturer's support site. If your TV is quite old, search for its manual on Manuals Lib (www.manualslib.com).

Insert the USB stick into a USB port on your TV (see photo below), open the Settings menu and look for an option relating to recording, formatting or registering the drive.

Once you've set up the stick, you can usually start recording by pressing the Rec button on your TV's remote, or by selecting that option on screen. On recent Samsung TVs, for example, press the 123 button then Record. You may even be able to schedule recordings using your TV's electronic programme guide (EPG). Press the Guide button on the remote, find and select the programme you want to save, then choose Record.

Note that some TVs will only record to an external hard drive rather than a USB stick. Also, due to encryption, you may not be able to play your recordings on your PC – only the TV you recorded them from. The feature uses your TV's Freeview or Freesat tuner, which means you can record any programme broadcast for free on those platforms, but not content from streaming services.

Credit: LG

Plug a USB stick into your TV and format it to record live TV shows

Should you buy a USB 4.0 stick?

USB 4.0 is the latest USB standard, offering incredible (though theoretical) transfer speeds of up to 40Gbps. However, while USB sticks promising USB 4.0 connectivity have started appearing on online marketplaces such as AliExpress, they should be treated with scepticism.

Most of these devices are (often deliberately) mislabelled USB 3.2 sticks, which won't deliver 40Gbps speeds. True USB 4.0 drives are currently rare and expensive (over £250), and even if you do buy one you won't enjoy the performance benefits unless your PC has USB 4.0 ports. Many computers now have Thunderbolt 3 or 4 ports, which also offer transfer speeds of up to 40Gbps, but plugging in a USB 4.0 stick won't get near that figure.

It's best to wait until genuine USB 4.0 devices become more widely available, which should bring prices down. USB 3.0 and above should prove fast enough for the tips in this feature.

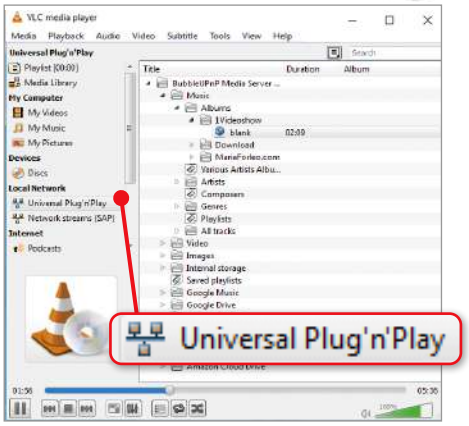
12 Set up your own media server

Storing music and videos on a USB stick gives you instant access to your entertainment wherever you can plug it in, such as on another computer, on a compatible smart TV or in your car (see our feature in Issue 714, page 60). While you're at home, you can even use the stick as a media server to stream music, films and TV programmes to other devices on your network.

To do so, plug the USB stick into a USB port on your router (assuming it has one – some ISP-supplied routers don't). The drive should be formatted as NTFS or exFAT and contain all the audio and video files you want to stream. Next, sign into your router's web interface through your PC browser and look for a USB Settings or USB Application section. Enable the option for Media Server, DLNA Server or similar and choose the folders you want to share on the USB stick. Click Apply or Save to set up your media server.

The best way to stream music and videos from the drive is to use VLC Media Player (www.snipca.com/55735), which is available for PCs, mobile devices and smart TVs powered by Android or Google TV, and makes it easy to connect to a DLNA server. In VLC for Windows, click the View menu and choose Playlist. Select 'Universal Plug 'n' Play' in the Local Network section (see screenshot right) and VLC will scan for DLNA/UPnP servers on your network. Once it has detected your USB-stick server, double-click it to browse and play its contents.

In the VLC app for Android and iOS, tap the Browse tab to find and connect to the DLNA server under Local Network.



Stream music and videos from a USB stick plugged into your router

The same instructions apply to the VLC app on smart TVs (updated in May) and streaming sticks that let you install it from their app stores.

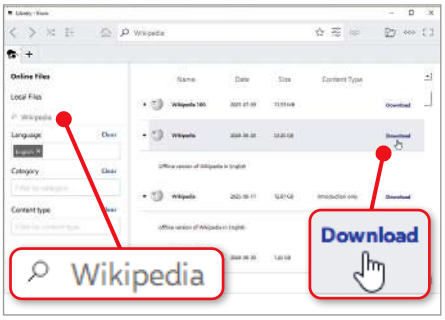
STORE USEFUL WEBSITES AND PASSWORDS

13 Download websites to browse offline

As your USB stick doesn't require an internet connection, it can be a lifesaver when you can't get online. As well as accessing files stored on it, you can download websites to browse offline.

The best tool for this job is Kiwix (www.snipca.com/55737), which lets you download the whole of Wikipedia as a 53GB file. If that seems excessive, smaller downloads are available that lack pictures and focus on the most popular pages. A hidden tip not many people know is that you can use Kiwix to download every free ebook from Project Gutenberg (83GB) so you'll always have something to read.

To use Kiwix, extract the contents of its ZIP file to your USB stick and double-click 'kiwix-desktop.exe'. If you see an error message, double-click 'vc_redist.x64.exe' to install Microsoft Visual C++ runtime. When the program opens, click Download next to your preferred Wikipedia option (see screenshot below left) or another resource to save it to your USB drive. Kiwix saves the files in its own ZIM format and they open in its browser.



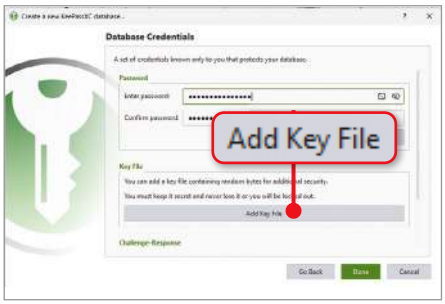
Use Kiwix to download the whole of Wikipedia to your USB stick

14 Create a password vault

Storing sensitive data such as passwords on a USB stick may sound risky because it could get lost or stolen. However, by encrypting it you can create a secure portable vault that contains your logins and other important information.

KeePass XC Portable, available through PortableApps.com and its own website (www.snipca.com/55738), makes this easy. Create a database, set the encryption level and enter a master password. You can also click 'Add additional protection' then Add Key File (see screenshot above) to generate or choose a 'key file' to further secure your database – store this on a separate drive. In March KeePass was updated to work with Proton Pass, making it even more useful.

Once you've saved your database on the stick, you can add usernames, passwords and other details – and even import data, including passkeys, from other password managers. Only you will be able to unlock your database using your master password and optional key file. ca



KeePass XC Portable encrypts passwords you store on a USB stick

NEXT ISSUE On sale Wednesday 27 August

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  How to spot fake photos & videos
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  Best new authenticator apps – tested

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– and here they are!
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Use Wi-Fi in your car

Want reliable internet on the road? **Jonathan Parkyn** explains how to add Wi-Fi to any car – and avoid being taken for a ride by overpriced data plans

Wi-Fi is everywhere, from your local café to airport lounges. Yet inside your car it's often missing unless you have a recent or expensive model (see box opposite). That's a real drawback. In-car Wi-Fi lets you share internet access with passengers, stream music without draining your phone's data, use maps and live traffic updates even with your phone off and keep tablets connected to entertain passengers during long trips.

But even if your car didn't come with built-in Wi-Fi, that doesn't mean you can't add it yourself. Here we'll explain how to turn almost any car into a rolling hotspot – from tethering your phone to installing a mobile router – as well as how to secure the best data deals.

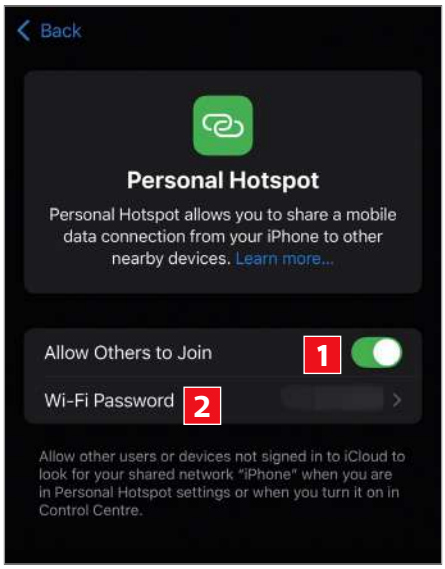
Turn your phone into a hotspot

Tethering (using your phone as a mobile hotspot) is the simplest way to get Wi-Fi in your car. It shares your phone's data connection with other devices nearby, such as laptops, tablets or other phones.

The UK's big four networks (EE, O2, Vodafone and Three) allow tethering, but some cheaper or older plans may limit hotspot use or cap how much data you can share. Giffgaff's fair-use policy, for example, warns against "regularly tethering to 12 or more devices" and caps usage at "around 650GB twice within a six-month period" (www.snipca.com/55751). Check your plan's terms to avoid unexpected charges or throttling.

Most modern phones support tethering, though budget Android models or older phones may lack the option or perform poorly when it's enabled. On an iPhone, tap Settings, Mobile Data (or Cellular), then Personal Hotspot. Switch on 'Allow Others to Join' (1 in screenshot below) and enter the Wi-Fi password 2 into the devices you want to connect.

The location of Android's tethering settings varies by manufacturer and version, but it's usually under Settings, then 'Network & Internet', followed by 'Hotspot & Tethering'. Tap 'Wi-Fi hotspot' to enable it, then set a network name and password if you haven't already.


Back
Personal Hotspot
Personal Hotspot allows you to share a mobile data connection from your iPhone to other nearby devices. Learn more...
Allow Others to Join
1
Wi-Fi Password
2
Allow other users or devices not signed in to iCloud to look for your shared network "iPhone" when you are in Personal Hotspot settings or when you turn it on in Control Centre.

Switch on 'Allow Others to Join' to turn your iPhone into a Wi-Fi hotspot

However, while in-car tethering is fine for occasional use, it has its drawbacks, other than restrictions on data and speed. Some mobile providers cap tethering data or throttle speeds. Phones can usually cope with only a handful of devices before connection quality drops, and incoming calls, app switching or weak signals can disrupt everyone's browsing. What's more, tethering drains your phone's battery fast, and even when plugged in, your device can get very hot, especially on warm days.

Get a mobile router for your car

Mobile broadband routers are more reliable. You sign up for a mobile broadband plan, insert a SIM card, then connect to a 4G or 5G network. Once set up, the router broadcasts a Wi-Fi signal that you and your passengers can use.

Unlike phone tethering, mobile broadband routers are built to handle multiple devices simultaneously, making them perfect for long journeys, family road trips and camping holidays. As they operate independently of your phone, they won't drain your battery or eat into your data. Connections tend to be more stable, and they won't drop when you take calls or use apps on your phone.

There are two types of in-car router. Portable MiFi routers are small, battery-powered devices you can move between vehicles or carry with you to continue using mobile broadband beyond your car – in a holiday home, for example. A good

TP-Link's M7350 4G LTE MiFi router can connect up to 10 devices to 4G networks

example is TP-Link's M7350 4G LTE MiFi (£60 from Amazon, www.snipca.com/55753, pictured above). It can connect up to 10 devices to high-speed 4G networks and has an eight-hour rechargeable battery. However, you'll have to remember to keep it charged – run out of battery power and everyone will lose their internet connection.

Alternatively, you could install a fixed router. These stay in place permanently, and are usually powered through your car's 12V socket or hardwired into its electrics. Your in-car Wi-Fi would always be on and ready for each journey, so you don't have to worry about charging it.

Most fixed routers, including the ALFA Networks 4G Camp-Pro 2+ (£155 from www.snipca.com/55754), are designed for use in caravans and campervans and come with external antenna connectors to boost signal quality.

For most people, MiFi routers are a simpler choice. They're easy to set up and you can often get one as part of a mobile broadband package. Fixed routers are less common and may need to be installed by a specialist. Also, hardwiring a device to your vehicle's fuse box can count as a non-approved modification and may invalidate your insurance or warranty.

Can you use a USB dongle?

Most modern cars have at least one USB port on the dashboard or centre console, so you might think you could simply plug in a mobile broadband dongle and get Wi-Fi that way. Sadly, it's not that simple.

Huawei's E8372h dongle supports up to 16 devices and works with any 4G SIM

Mobile broadband dongles – such as the TCL Dongle 4G that O2 often supplies – work much like MiFi devices. They contain a SIM card and connect to 4G. In contrast, many dongles act more like modems than routers. They don't have their own internet connection and need a computer to work. Plug one into your car's USB port and nothing will happen.

However, a growing number of devices are available that combine the convenience of a USB dongle with the full Wi-Fi broadcasting of a MiFi router. These don't need a host computer and they create their own Wi-Fi signal, making them perfect for cars. The Huawei E8372h (£105 from www.snipca.com/55755, pictured below left) is a great example. It supports up to 16 devices and is sold unlocked, which means you can use a 4G SIM from any provider. Plug it into your car's USB port or a 12V-to-USB adapter to power it, then set it up using Huawei's mobile app.

Get the best in-car broadband deals

Before you rush out to buy hardware, bear in mind that many UK networks include MiFi routers as part of their mobile broadband deals. O2, for example, offers the Netgear Nighthawk M6 Mobile Router (pictured above right) with several of its plans. It connects to 5G networks, supports up to 32 devices and delivers fast Wi-Fi 6 speeds. It costs a staggering £740 to buy outright (www.snipca.com/55756), but O2's deals start at £21 per month with no upfront cost on a 36-month contract (rising to £28 after six months) and include 40GB of monthly data. Over the course of the contract, the router's total cost works out at £504 – a significant saving.

Netgear's Nighthawk M6 Mobile Router costs £740, but O2 offers it from £21 a month

If you prefer to buy your own router and then choose the cheapest data deal, you'll find plenty of low-cost SIM-only plans. Smarty, for example, offers 40GB of 4G/5G data for just £13 a month (www.snipca.com/55761). There's no long-term contract, and you get 12GB of EU roaming too.

As with any mobile phone contract, when choosing a provider and plan for in-car Wi-Fi, you need to consider signal coverage, data allowance, contract length and cost. Look for a network that offers a strong signal in the areas you drive most often (use Ofcom's signal checker, www.snipca.com/55762), and make sure the plan includes enough data for your typical usage.

If you decide to buy your own MiFi router rather than taking a contract that includes one, you have more freedom over which model you get – but check that it supports the network you plan to use. As with phones, some mobile broadband devices are locked to specific networks. ca

Does your car already have Wi-Fi?

Several car manufacturers now offer factory-fitted Wi-Fi through integrated SIM slots or eSIMs and built-in modems, allowing your car to connect to the internet and create its own hotspot. Ford's FordPass Connect has been available since 2018 on models including the Focus, Puma and Kuga. BMW's ConnectedDrive supports Wi-Fi hotspots in many newer cars, and Jaguar Land Rover's InControl system provides similar features.

Some manufacturers offer a free trial, but you'll usually need to buy a dedicated in-car data plan afterwards. In most cases, you set up and manage your plan through the car's infotainment system or an app.

This is certainly convenient, but depending on your model, you may find you're limited to a specific mobile network provider, with low data caps and high monthly charges. Some BMW models, for example, require a special Vodafone data plan that costs as much as £35 per month for just 6GB of data. Check the plan's details before you sign up – you may get a better deal by adding Wi-Fi yourself.

8 PROGRAMS WE REGRET INSTALLING

From subscription traps to upgrade nags, software has a habit of letting us down. Four *Computeractive* writers reveal the programs they wish they'd never installed – and what they now use instead

NICK PEERS

1 Plex

Until recently, I used Plex (www.plex.tv) to run my home entertainment server, but despite paying for a lifetime Plex Pass (£190 from www.snipca.com/55685) I've grown uneasy at the limits the company places on free users, as well as its increasing focus on promoting its streaming channels over my own libraries. Blocking remote streaming for free users was the final straw.

And what I use instead

Jellyfin (https://jellyfin.org) is a completely free alternative that offers everything you want from a home media server. Its features, including support for live TV and DVRs, are almost on a par with Plex's, and everything is unlimited, including apps for streaming on any device.

Using it requires a little extra learning, particularly when setting up remote access. But once you've done that, it's easy to use, with great options for subtitles (see screenshot below left). Having run it side by side with Plex, I have no hesitation in recommending it for new users.

Subtitles
English - AAC - Stereo - Default
English - Dolby Digital - 5.1
The human
English - Dolby Digital - Stereo
English - Dolby Digital - Stereo
Star Trek: The Motion Picture
STAR TREK

Jellyfin is an excellent alternative to the Plex media server, with lots of options for subtitles

2 Evernote

Like Plex, note-taking tool Evernote (www.evernote.com) is guilty of gutting its free version to the point of making it useless. In August 2024 it made the crazy decision to limit free users to syncing on just one offline device.

And what I use instead

After trying several basic note-taking apps, I realised I needed something that offered Evernote's wealth of features. I struck gold with **Joplin** (https://joplinapp.org), which supports a wide range of note types, from plain text to nicely formatted notes containing lists, to-do boxes, tables and more.

Most importantly, you can install Joplin for free across your devices – PC, Mac, phone or tablet – and keep them in sync using your current cloud provider (including OneDrive or Dropbox) or Joplin's own paid-for service (www.snipca.com/55688).

JONATHAN PARKYN

3 MyCleanPC

I tried MyCleanPC (www.mycleanpc.com) while researching tools for removing junk from my PC. It claims to be free, but in effect it holds your PC to ransom by finding tons of junk then forcing you to pay when you click the Clean Now button. It also secretly installs an unwanted 'tech support' chatbot app.

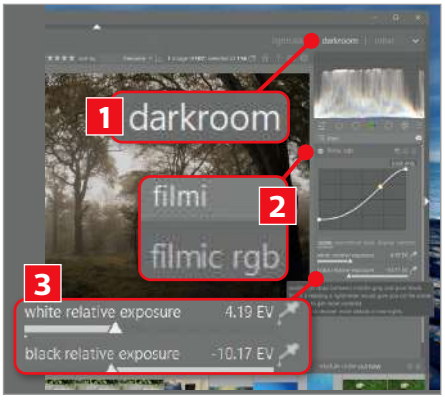
And what I use instead

Some PC-cleaning tools do little more than replicate Windows' Storage Sense feature. **Wise Disk Cleaner** (www.snipca.com/55560) performs much deeper cleans, rooting out both temporary files in Windows and leftover files from third-party programs – click the arrow next to 'Windows and Applications traces' under the Common Cleaner tab to select these.

I use the System Slimming tool when I'm running short of space. This reclaims storage capacity by removing Windows Update logs, old installer files and other components you don't need. Click the System Slimming tab at the top, tick the boxes to the left of items you want to delete, then click the Remove button. Best of all, it's completely free.

4 Lightroom

For years I used Adobe Lightroom (www.adobe.com/lightroom) to manage my huge photo library, and particularly for processing RAW images. Then in 2017 Adobe said Lightroom 6 would be the final download-only version. Like many software companies, it now forces users to subscribe.



Use Darktable's 'relative exposure' sliders to recover highlights and shadows in photos

Snappy Driver Installer Origin updates drivers for free, and doesn't plague you with adverts

And what I use instead

I switched to **Darktable** (www.darktable.org), an incredibly powerful Lightroom alternative with a mind-boggling array of tools. My favourite is the Filmic RGB module, which lets you control highlights and lowlights in a way that looks natural and cinematic. Click 'darkroom' (1 in screenshot above) then search for filmic rgb 2. Under the Scene tab, use the white and black 'relative exposure' sliders to recover highlights and shadows 3.

It's not the easiest program to learn, but the website has some great resources to get you started, and most tools explain what they do if you hover your cursor over them. And unlike Lightroom, it's free and open-source – so should never require a subscription.

ROBERT IRVINE

5 DriverMax

Windows updates most drivers automatically, but I still worry that it will miss some. DriverMax (www.drivermax.com) appeared to offer a fast and free way to update my drivers, but it failed on both counts. It's riddled with ads and although it scanned my PC for outdated drivers, it told me I had to upgrade to the Pro version (for £54) if I wanted to update more than one at a time – or two per day.

And what I use instead

Snappy Driver Installer Origin (www.snipca.com/55649) – SDIO for short – is the only driver updater I've found that doesn't charge. It's more complicated to use than others, and installing it triggers a SmartScreen warning, but it's safe and doesn't have any adverts or catches.

To use SDIO, I downloaded its 20MB indexes pack, which scanned my PC to detect any drivers that needed updating. These were highlighted in green and included AMD and Realtek drivers for my PC's graphics and audio components. I created a system restore point (1 in our screenshot above) and ticked all the entries for which updates were available. I then clicked Install 2 and SDIO downloaded and updated the drivers.

6 Arc Browser

I love trying new browsers, so I was excited to download Arc (https://arc.net) from The Browser Company when it arrived in a blaze of hype last year. Sadly, I found it was more about style than innovative features. It required me to sign up for an account, and not just to sync data between devices. Its developer has apparently lost interest too because Arc was recently discontinued.

And what I use instead

After my underwhelming Arc experience, I approached the new **Zen Browser** beta (www.snipca.com/55653) with trepidation. I was pleasantly surprised that it's an attractive, speedy browser that doesn't skimp on features. Unlike most browsers, it's based on Firefox not Chromium, so I can install extensions from the Mozilla Add-ons store and enjoy Enhanced Tracking Protection.

You can customise Zen with colourful themes, and I love the split-screen mode for viewing two tabs at once. The handy Workspaces feature lets me switch between personal and work profiles.

DANIEL BOOTH

7 Dropbox

I loved Dropbox (www.dropbox.com) when it launched in the years before OneDrive and Google Drive. I stuck with it until a year ago when syncing through its desktop tool became so slow I had enough time to boil my kettle, drink my tea, boil it again and drink another while waiting.

And what I use instead

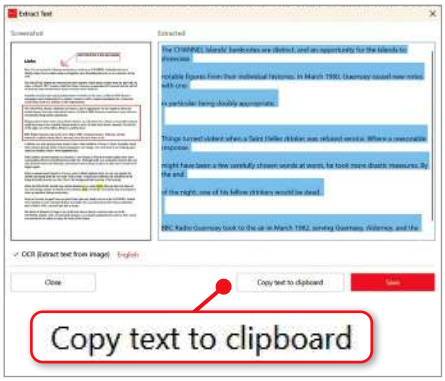
I know Microsoft and Google would have welcomed me, but I prefer software from smaller developers because it's usually faster, safer and has smarter features. That's certainly true of Swiss company **pCloud** which, like Proton (https://proton.me), has to follow the country's strict privacy laws. You start with 2GB for free, but you can boost this to 10GB by performing basic tasks such as verifying your email address and downloading pCloud Drive (see www.snipca.com/55691).

8 Nitro PDF Reader

I was one of the 77 million Nitro PDF users (www.gonitro.com) whose email address was stolen by hackers in 2020, as confirmed by Have I Been Pwned: www.snipca.com/55692. I stuck with it for a few more years out of misplaced loyalty, but jumped ship when I could no longer stand its nags to upgrade.

And what I use instead

PDFgear (www.pdfgear.com) continues to astound me. I downloaded it a few weeks after it launched in 2022, and it's been regularly updated with superb tools since. The most useful for me is OCR – I click 'Copy text to clipboard' (see screenshot below) to paste the text into Word, Google Docs, Notepad and other places. I also like its new Scan app (see page 44).



Like all PDFgear's tools, OCR is completely free – for now at least

Somehow PDFgear is still completely free, with no sneaky fees. This surely can't last – its Singapore owners must want to make money eventually. I hope it will limit these to its AI tools, leaving more traditional PDF tools free. ca

Problems Solved

Our experts solve all your tech problems

PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

How do I connect my old speakers?

Q I have an old Sonos controller that no longer works, and two Sonos speakers that do – or they would if the controller was working. I'd like to connect the speakers to a more modern sound source, but I don't recognise any of the connection sockets on the back. The first is square and looks like a LAN port. The second is threaded and doesn't look like anything I've seen before. I've been a reader for over 25 years, so I'm hoping you can help.

William Potter

A You didn't tell us exactly which Sonos devices you have, but based on your description of the equipment as 'old', we'd guess that the controller is the Sonos CR200. This was discontinued well over a decade ago, but a working model can control speakers connected to a SonosNet mesh system.

With that in mind, we think the speakers are probably Play:1 models (pictured above right). These are also getting on a bit in technology terms, and were officially discontinued five years ago. They feature both an Ethernet (LAN) port and a threaded socket, so they match your description. However, this threaded socket is actually a mounting point for a wall bracket or stand, not an audio connector. In fact, Play:1 speakers don't have separate audio connectors, because they're designed for streaming through an Ethernet cable or directly from a phone, tablet or computer.

So where does that leave you? Well, you could buy a device such as the Sonos Port (www.snipca.com/55389, pictured right), which can connect to an existing hi-fi system using traditional RCA audio connectors (ringed in photo) as well as stream audio wirelessly to your Play:1 speakers. However, at £399, this is an expensive option.

Sonos Play:1 speakers have a network port on the back and a threaded mounting point

Alternatively, if your goal is simply to play music from a smartphone, tablet or PC, you can do that through a Sonos app. The app is necessary because the Play:1 speakers don't directly support Bluetooth or Apple AirPlay streaming, but once the Sonos app is installed and connected to your preferred music service, streaming is easy. It's a free download from the relevant app store: (iOS www.snipca.com/55390; Android www.snipca.com/55391).

To stream from a Windows PC or Apple Mac, download the app directly from the Sonos website, at www.snipca.com/55392.

Finally, as these speakers have been used before, it's a good idea to perform a factory reset before setting them up with any of the apps we've mentioned.

Before you do this, disconnect the power from the Play:1 speaker. Next, press and hold down both the Play and Volume-up buttons on the top of the device. While holding these down, reconnect the power and wait for the indicator light to turn white, then orange and then green, then release. Repeat the process with the second speaker, then open the app you downloaded earlier and follow the steps to add the speakers to your wireless network.

The Sonos Port can connect to a standard hi-fi system as well as Sonos speakers

Can I resurrect my locked DVD player?

Q Many years ago I treated myself to a Sony DAV-DZ230 home cinema system. This allowed me to play DVDs from all regions around the world, not just the UK. Unfortunately, a family member pressed a control button several times while trying to play a DVD from a zone outside the UK, changing the zone. Now it won't accept any DVDs at all. Is there a way to correct this?

Alan Ingram

A This is a little strange, because older consumer DVD players tended to be locked to one region. For any system bought and used in the UK and Europe, this would be Region 2. Region 0 discs would also play, because independent distributors deliberately made them without region restrictions to ensure global compatibility. Manufacturers sometimes supplied DVD players unlocked, but they would then lock to a region after a few plays. So we're surprised that after years of playing (presumably) Region 2 discs, your machine is now refusing to play anything at all.

It sounds as if someone may have inserted a disc from, say, Region 1 (United States), and in trying to get it to work, exceeded the system's limit on region changes – typically five. Once that limit is reached, the player permanently locks to the last region set and may refuse to play Region 2 or even Region 0 discs, depending on how the firmware handles the lock.

With some players, including yours, you can reverse this by sending a series of control codes using an infrared remote control. In theory, it's possible to create and send these codes using a universal remote if you happen to have one. However, it's pretty complicated, and also expensive if you need to buy the remote.

A quicker and easier option is to buy a circuit-board-style 'hack' remote built by electronics enthusiasts for the purpose of resetting your DVD region. The unit pictured above right, for example, costs around £19 from www.snipca.com/55676.

A cheap, enthusiast-built 'hack' remote control can help you reset a locked Sony DVD player

To use it, first put the DVD player into service mode by pressing and holding its Stop and Eject buttons for a few seconds, then turning its volume knob to the right. Once you've done that, tap the button on the hack remote and within a few moments, your DVD player will be free of all region locks.

Why won't Apple replace my iPad Pro's battery?

Q The battery life of my fourth-generation 12.9in iPad Pro has deteriorated recently. Apple doesn't let users access battery-health information on this model, but I ran a test using an app and it calculated that my cell's capacity is just 79.23 per cent of what it was when new.

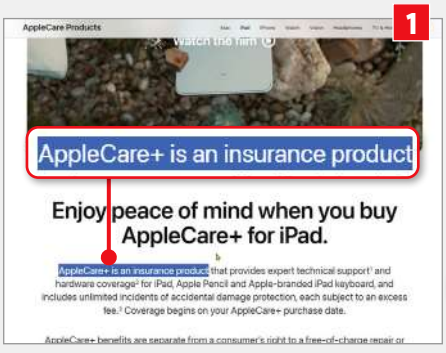
I pay for AppleCare+, which is supposed to cover a replacement battery if its health drops below 80 per cent. However, when I contacted Apple support, its staff ran some remote tests and told me the battery's capacity was 87 per cent, so I wouldn't get a replacement battery. Why is there such a discrepancy?

Philip Huxham

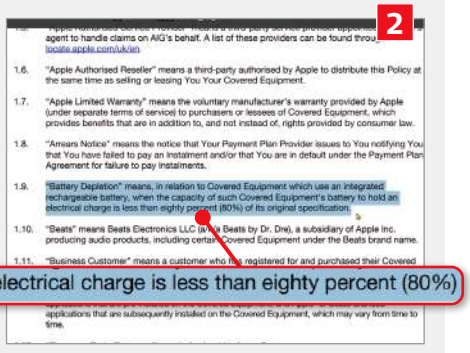
A We understand your frustration, and you're not alone in encountering this issue. It's true that Apple doesn't show battery-health data on older iPads, which leaves users relying on third-party apps that estimate battery wear based on log data. These can give an approximate figure, but only Apple has access to the full diagnostics and calibration data you'd need to assess battery health accurately.

So, that explains the discrepancy. Your specific iPad was released in 2020. Batteries degrade over time, and a capacity drop of 13 per cent over five years is not unusual or unreasonable. At this rate, your device will be eight years old before it drops below 80 per cent. AppleCare+ is an insurance scheme (see screenshot 1), with lots of terms and conditions 2 (see www.snipca.com/55394).

Apple will have set this threshold knowing that few people keep devices long enough to make a claim.



As with all insurance products, AppleCare+ is calibrated to minimise the number of claims


2
1.6. "Apple Authorised Reseller" means a third-party authorised by Apple to distribute this Policy at the same time as selling or leasing You Your Covered Equipment.
1.7. "Apple Limited Warranty" means the voluntary manufacturer's warranty provided by Apple (under separate terms of service) to purchasers or lessees of Covered Equipment, which provides benefits that are in addition to, and not instead of, rights provided by consumer law.
1.8. "Arrears Notice" means the notice that Your Payment Plan Provider issues to You notifying You that You have failed to pay an instalment and/or that You are in default under the Payment Plan Agreement for failure to pay instalments.
1.9. "Battery Depletion" means, in relation to Covered Equipment which use an integrated rechargeable battery, when the capacity of such Covered Equipment's battery to hold an electrical charge is less than eighty percent (80%) of its original specification.
1.10. "Beats" means Beats Electronics LLC (a/k/a Beats by Dr. Dre), a subsidiary of Apple Inc. producing audio products, including certain Covered Equipment under the Beats brand name.
1.11. "Business Customer" means a customer who has registered for and purchased their Covered
electrical charge is less than eighty percent (80%)

AppleCare will pay for a new battery if the old one holds less than 80 per cent charge

Can I delete old WhatsApp chats automatically?

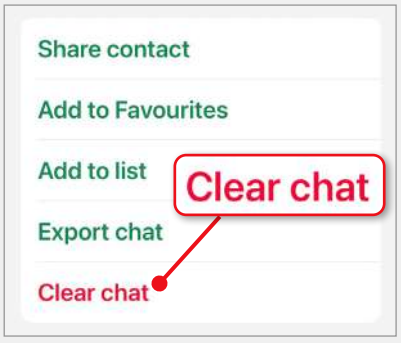
Q Some of my WhatsApp chats go back years. Is there a way to delete messages older than, say, three months?

John Scoote

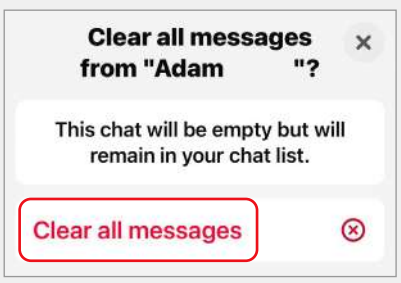
A Unfortunately, WhatsApp doesn't offer a way to delete messages older than a specific date. However, you can set up features that automatically remove new messages after a set period, so in effect you can achieve what you want in the future.

First, open a chat and tap the contact's name at the top. Next, scroll down to find and tap the 'Clear chat' option (see screenshot 1), then confirm by tapping 'Clear all messages' 2. Note this will erase the entire chat history. Now scroll back up a little to find and tap the 'Disappearing messages' option. Finally, tap 90 days.

This contact's chat history will now be a clean slate, and any new messages you receive will be deleted automatically after 90 days.



Open a chat in WhatsApp and click the 'Clear chat' option to erase its messages



WhatsApp will ask you to confirm your decision because it can't be reversed

What's causing my screen to go blank?

Q My home-built PC has an Asus Prime A320M-K motherboard with a Ryzen 5 2400G processor, and built-in Radeon Vega graphics. It runs Windows 10 (22H2) and connects to an Asus monitor through an HDMI cable.

It works fine most of the time, but something strange happens when I access the MSN news page using the Edge browser. When I click an item on MSN, the monitor's screen occasionally goes black for several seconds before coming back on. I have no idea what's causing this annoying problem. Do you?

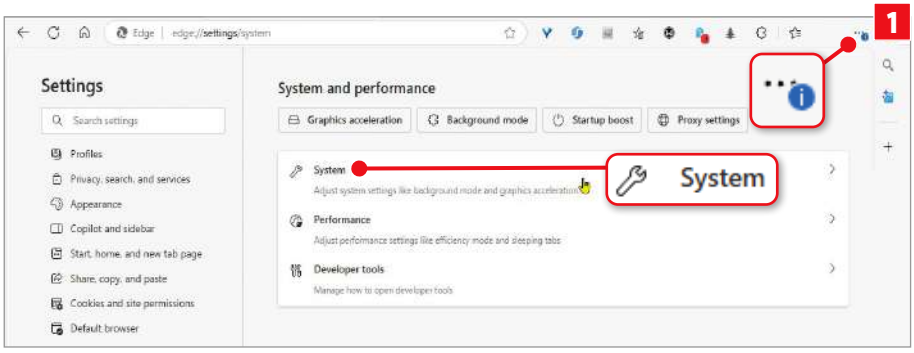
John C Miller

A It sounds as if the Vega graphics hardware or driver is briefly crashing before recovering – because the screen briefly going black is exactly what happens in this situation.

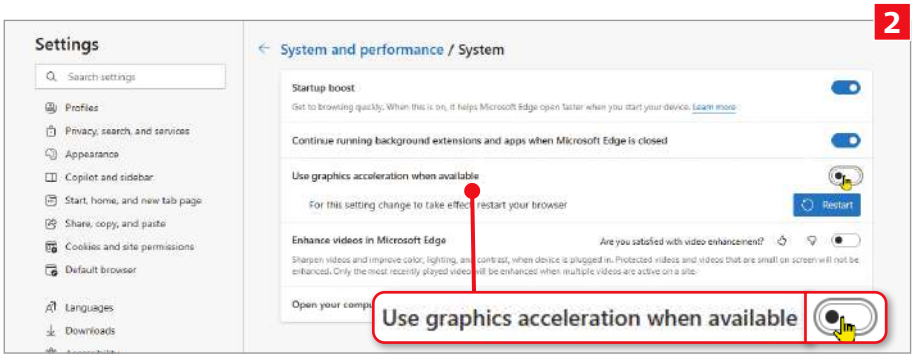
The circumstances you describe are very specific, so something on the MSN news page must be triggering this. We can't say for sure what it might be, but your first recourse is to ensure you have the latest AMD Adrenalin graphics drivers installed, from www.snipca.com/55395.

If that doesn't help, switching off hardware acceleration in Edge will almost certainly fix the problem. This stops the browser calling on the Vega part of your processor, which is probably what's causing this. Doing so will make little if any performance difference.

First open the Edge menu (three dots, top right). Next, on the left, click 'System and performance' and then, on the right, click System (see screenshot 1). Click to turn off the 'Use graphics acceleration when available' slider 2. Finally, click the Restart button to relaunch Edge.



Open the Edge menu, then select the 'System & performance' settings followed by System


2
Settings
System and performance / System
Startup boost
Continue running background extensions and apps when Microsoft Edge is closed
Use graphics acceleration when available
For this setting change to take effect restart your browser
Restart
Enhance videos in Microsoft Edge
Use graphics acceleration when available

Switch off the option to 'Use graphics acceleration when available' then click the Restart button

Q: How do I securely wipe my old hard drives?

A: Issue 682, page 67 – find it on our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/53433

Should I disable Secure Boot to run my laptop from a USB stick?

Q I'd like to boot my Acer Swift 3 laptop from a USB stick so I can try out some alternative operating systems without installing them. When I access the UEFI interface through Windows 11's recovery option, I can see that the Boot Mode is set to UEFI and that Secure Boot is enabled.

Do I need to change settings in the UEFI to allow booting from USB? Would disabling Secure Boot cause any problems with Windows 11? I saw an option to use an EFI USB device under Advanced Startup. Could I use this to boot from USB storage without making any changes to the UEFI settings?

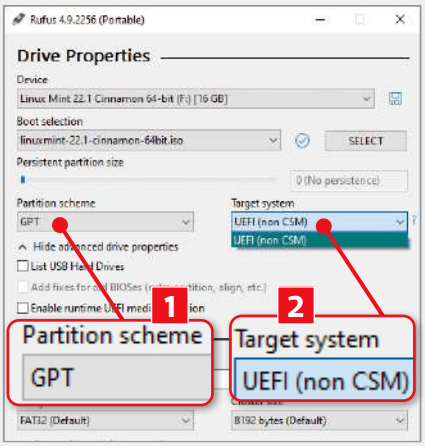
Gordon McFarlane

A You can disable Secure Boot temporarily without affecting Windows 11, as long as you re-enable it afterwards. However, this may be unnecessary, because many modern Linux distributions (or distros) include Microsoft-signed bootloaders, which allow them to boot on a computer that has Secure Boot enabled.

You can use the popular free tool Rufus (https://rufus.ie) to create a bootable USB stick from an operating system ISO file. You should then be able to use this through the UEFI's One-Time Boot Menu without having to disable Secure Boot.

To access the One-Time Boot Menu, press F12 after switching on your PC. When creating your USB stick in Rufus, set the 'Partition scheme' to GPT (1 in our screenshot) and the 'Target system' to 'UEFI (non CSM)' 2. If Secure Boot blocks the bootloader, disabling Secure Boot temporarily should allow it to work.

As for the 'EFI USB device' option you spotted in Acer's UEFI, you're right to think this is another valid way to boot from USB without entering the BIOS or changing settings permanently. Just make sure you plug in the USB stick before you restart. If your PC detects the USB stick, it should appear in the boot list and your computer should start up as usual.



When making a bootable USB stick in Rufus, set 'Partition scheme' to GPT and 'Target system' to 'UEFI (non CSM)'

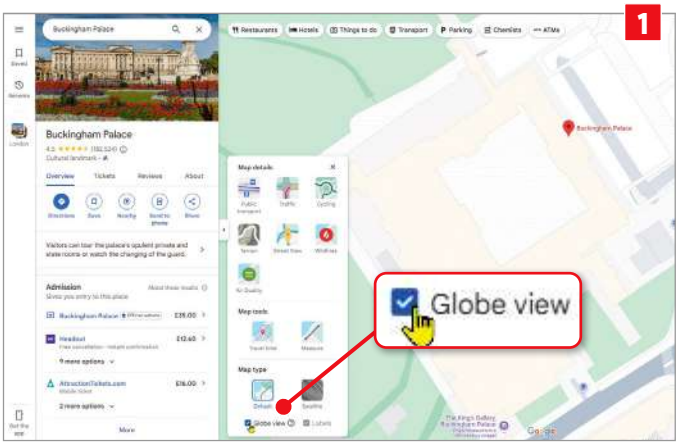
Why doesn't Google Maps show 3D buildings?

Q It occurred to me recently that Google Maps no longer shows buildings in three dimensions on my PC. In the past I could hold down the Shift key, then click and drag with my mouse to orient the display and tilt it at an angle for an impressive 3D view. I discovered this feature by accident once by resting a pen against my keyboard while moving the mouse in Maps. It didn't work for every location, but my city was among those that did, and now it's gone. I upgraded my laptop a few weeks ago but it's much better than the old model, so I can't imagine it's a performance problem. Has Google removed this feature? If so, why?

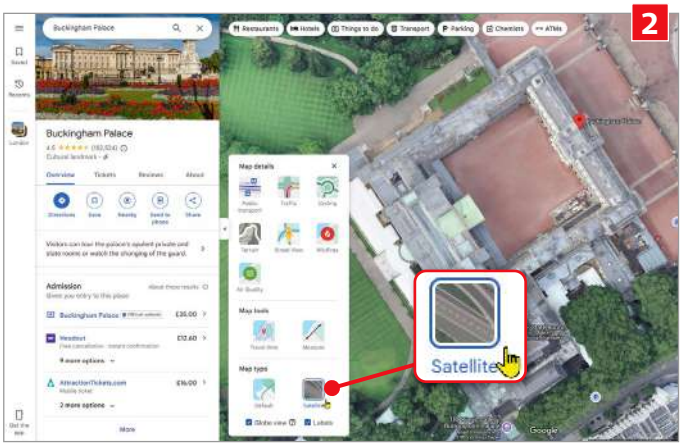
Graham Bush

A Google calls this feature Globe view and, no, it hasn't been removed. Its mysterious disappearance probably has nothing to do with your new laptop's performance, either. We think that during the transition from your old PC to your new one, the Globe view option was somehow switched off. Thankfully it's easy to fix.

First, click the Layers icon in the bottom-left of the map area. Next, select More from the panel of options that appears. Finally, in the 'Map details' pane that opens, click to tick the 'Globe view' option (see screenshot 1). We think you probably already know that this only works in Satellite view, which you can select from the Layers pane (see screenshot 2) – but we're pointing this out for the benefit of other readers.



Click 'Layers' then More in Google Maps, and tick 'Globe view'



The 3D effect only works in Satellite view, so select this in Layers

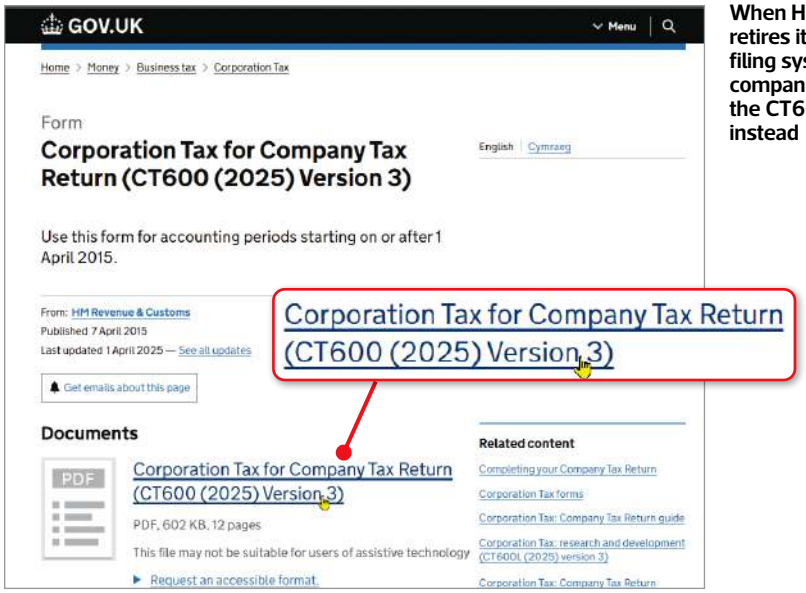
Can I avoid paying to submit company taxes?

Q My son has been running a very small business alongside his main employment for the past two decades. As I'm more IT savvy than him, I've happily used HMRC's software for both his personal self-assessment and business returns.

HMRC announced recently that it will no longer offer an online service for filing Company Tax Returns after 31 March next year. This is disappointing but I guess the more complicated the Government makes taxes, the more time it has to devote to maintaining software systems – so it would sooner offload the problem and the costs to third parties.

Is there any software I can use to replace HMRC's system, which I found very easy? I would like a free option if possible

N H Dave


GOV.UK
Menu
Home > Money > Business tax > Corporation Tax
Form
Corporation Tax for Company Tax Return (CT600 (2025) Version 3)
English | Cymraeg
Use this form for accounting periods starting on or after 1 April 2015.
From: HM Revenue & Customs
Published 7 April 2015
Last updated 1 April 2025 — See all updates
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PDF
Corporation Tax for Company Tax Return (CT600 (2025) Version 3)
PDF, 602 KB, 12 pages
This file may not be suitable for users of assistive technology
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Corporation Tax: research and development (CT600L (2025) version 3)
Corporation Tax: Company Tax Return
Corporation Tax for Company Tax Return (CT600 (2025) Version 3)

When HMRC retires its online filing system for companies, use the CT600 form instead

A We suspect your assumptions about HMRC's motivations are correct, but the decision has been made and it's happening. The Government's website does have a tool to help you find software for filing company accounts at www.snipca.com/55396. Sadly, there are no free options among them and we expect you've already found this list.

However, we wonder if you know that you can still file a Company Tax Return manually, using the CT600 form (www.snipca.com/55397 – see screenshot above). It's not as easy as the automated system HMRC is retiring next year, and you'll need to use a spreadsheet to track income and expenditure for your son's business – but at least it's free. If your son's tax affairs are pretty straightforward it's probably your best option.

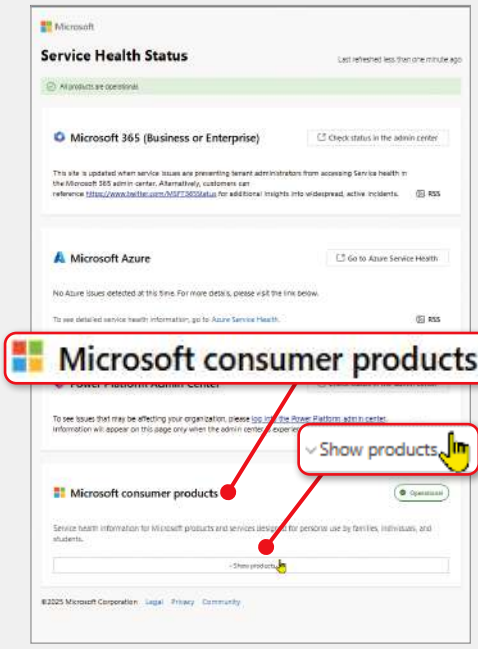
Did Windows update break Outlook.com?

Q Since downloading the latest Windows 11 update, I find that I can't always log into Outlook.com. Instead, a message tells me that a '500 Internal Server Error' has occurred. Did the update cause this? And how can I fix it?

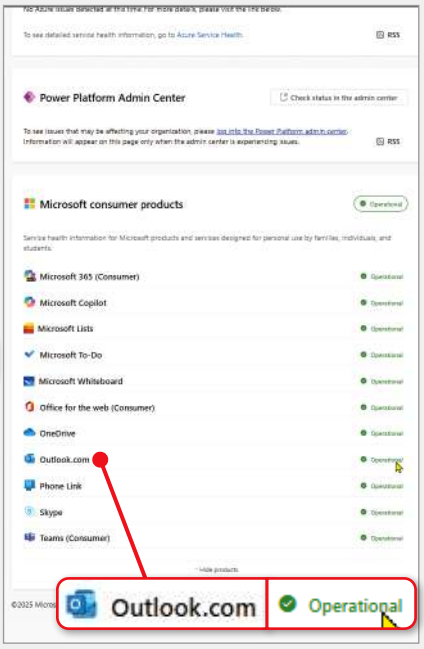
Anthony Martin

A This issue may have coincided with a Windows 11 update, but the cause was actually a glitch on Microsoft's side, not with your PC. This has now been fixed, but we're publishing your question anyway because several readers asked about it. It's a good reminder that sometimes problems are remote, not local.

In situations like this, it's worth checking the official service-status pages. Microsoft provides a handy Service Health Status page at https://status.cloud.microsoft. Click the 'Show products' link (see screenshot above) under 'Microsoft consumer products' to see the current status of Outlook.com and other services. A colour-coded system shows whether they're up and running (see screenshot above).



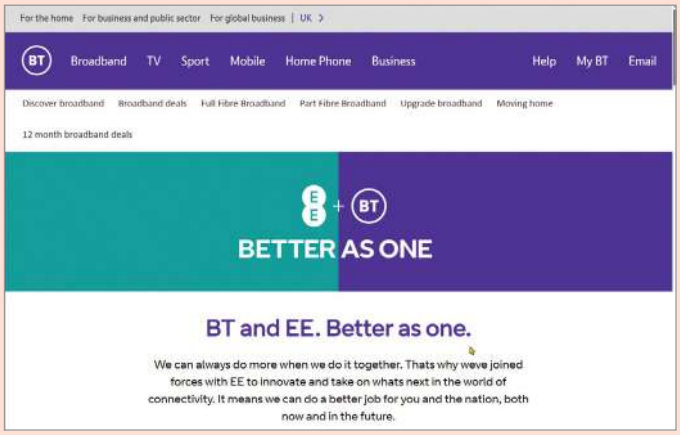
Microsoft's status pages let you find out if a particular service is experiencing problems



Microsoft uses a colour-coded system to show whether its services are working

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

BT and EE?


For the home For business and public sector For global business | UK
BT
Broadband TV Sport Mobile Home Phone Business
Help My BT Email
Discover broadband Broadband deals Full Fibre Broadband Part Fibre Broadband Upgrade broadband Moving home
12 month broadband deals
BETTER AS ONE
BT and EE. Better as one.
We can always do more when we do it together. Thats why weve joined forces with EE to innovate and take on whats next in the world of connectivity. It means we can do a better job for you and the nation, both now and in the future.

EE and BT are two parts of the same company – for now, at least

Q I appreciated your excellent explanation of the different Outlook versions in Issue 712. Do you think you could do the same for BT and EE? In the same issue's Consumeractive section (page 14), fellow reader Peter Gordon says he switched his broadband from BT to EE. I did the same, but only because I thought I had to, as I'd been told BT was now for businesses while EE was for domestic users. I'd had my landline with BT for many years, along with broadband. I'd previously switched my mobile phone from Orange to EE. I'm happy with the current situation, but I'm curious about what's been going on.

John Roberts

A A decade's worth of corporate shenanigans is what's been going on, so let's go back a bit. In 2015, BT became what's known as a mobile virtual network operator, or MVNO, piggybacking on EE's real physical network to offer mobile services under the name BT Mobile.

One year later, following further boardroom battle-planning, BT bought EE to take full control of the network. So, at that time, BT operated the BT Mobile brand but also owned and operated the EE network and EE mobile brand. This meant the same company took responsibility for both BT and EE customer accounts (see screenshot).

Things changed a couple of years ago, when BT Group announced a rebrand. It decided that it would no longer market the BT name to consumers, and that BT Group would instead market EE as its flagship name for mobile, broadband and TV. It would shift the BT brand toward business services instead. So BT Mobile stopped taking on new customers, and existing users were encouraged – or nudged – to move to EE. That's probably why you ended up being 'switched' from BT Mobile to EE.

That's not the end of the story however. Last year, BT Group got a new boss, who decided that retiring the BT name might not be such a good idea after all. Who knows what this means in the long run, especially given the revolving-door nature of modern boardrooms.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Why won't my USB stick accept my photos' data?

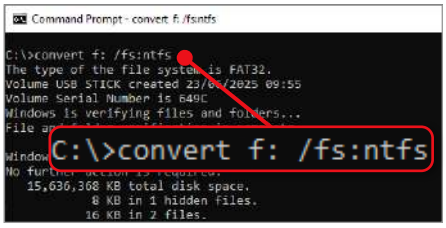
Q While loading photos to an old USB stick recently, Windows asked if I was sure I wanted to copy the file 'without its properties', as it couldn't copy these to the drive. I have no idea what this means. As an experiment, I tried copying a Word document to the drive and it worked, so it seems to be functional. What's going on?

Jacob Gray

A This almost certainly indicates that your USB stick has been formatted using the older FAT32 file system. This is good for compatibility, but it can't store all the metadata that modern NTFS file systems can. Metadata is extra information about a file, such as a photo's resolution, its exposure settings and the make and model of camera that took it. To view this metadata, right-click a file and choose Properties.

Your photos probably contain metadata that FAT32 can't handle, so you'd lose some of it if you copied the files to a FAT32 drive. If you click 'Yes' to proceed, the photos will copy without problems, but you'll lose some of the NTFS-only metadata. There's no easy way to tell which data you would lose.

If you use your USB stick only with Windows PCs, converting its file system to NTFS will solve the problem. Press Windows key+E to open File Explorer and check the USB stick's drive letter. Next, click Start, type cmd then press Enter. In the Command Prompt window, type convert X: /fs:ntfs (replacing X: with your USB's drive letter, see screenshot) and press Enter. The conversion will take a few minutes. Once finished, the warning will no longer appear and you'll be able to copy your images with all their metadata intact.


Command Prompt - convert f: /fs:ntfs
C:\>convert f: /fs:ntfs
The type of the file system is FAT32.
Volume USB_STICK created 23/08/2025 09:55
Volume Serial Number is 649C
Windows is verifying files and folders...
C:\>convert f: /fs:ntfs
15,636,368 KB total disk space.
8 KB in 1 hidden files.
16 KB in 2 files.

Convert your USB stick's file system to NTFS by typing this into Command Prompt

Next Issue

ON SALE **Weds 27 Aug**

- How do I regain control of my USB stick?
- How can I keep my laptop awake?
- Can I get a Caps Lock key alert? ...And many more

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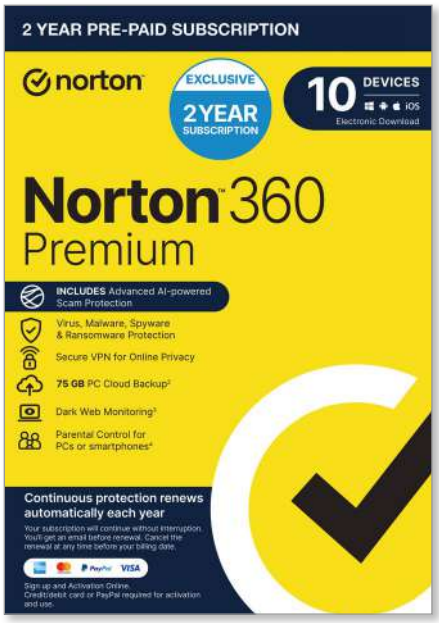

Norton is made by NortonLifeLock Inc – a standalone company dedicated to consumer cyber safety. It has always performed strongly in *Computeractive* antivirus tests, so we highly recommend it.

10 devices for two years NOW ONLY £19.99*

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Reader Support

Having a problem with our recommended software or expert tips? Email **editor@computeractive.co.uk** and we'll do our best to help

Can I remove duplicate music from Screenbox?

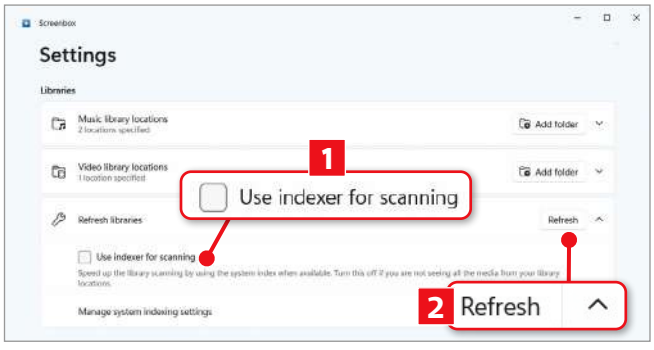
Q I'm in my 90s and have been struggling to read the text in VLC Media Player, so Screenbox (www.snipca.com/55147, Issue 713, page 38) is a breath of fresh air. But having downloaded the program and opened it, I'm seeing a lot of duplication of music files. Do you know if Screenbox has a way of removing these duplicates?

David Kerney

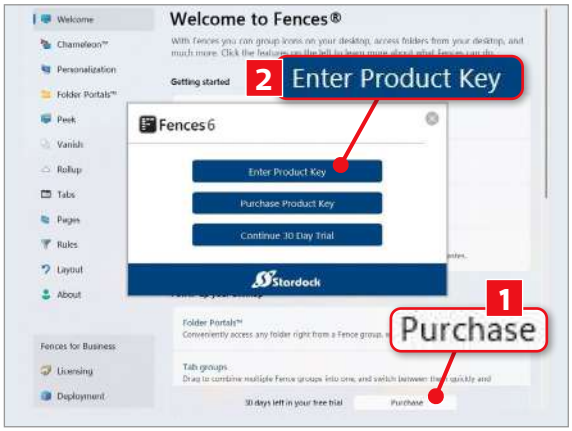
A Screenbox doesn't appear to have its own built-in way of removing duplicates. However, try clicking Settings, then Refresh under 'Refresh libraries'. If that doesn't help, click the down arrow next to the Refresh button and untick the 'Use indexer for scanning' box (1 in our screenshot below). Now click the Refresh button 2 and wait until the scan finishes (it could take a while).

Our thinking here is that, by default, Screenbox uses your system indexer to scan for items to add to your library, so it's possible this is somehow introducing duplicates where there are none. This method is by no means guaranteed to fix your problem, but it can't hurt.

If you're still seeing duplicates in Screenbox, install AllDup (www.snipca.com/49056) to look for duplicated files lurking on your PC. AllDup won the Gold Award in Issue 677's 'Remove all your duplicate files' Cover Feature – read it on our 2024 Back Issue USB Stick: www.snipca.com/53180.



If you see duplicates in Screenbox, untick 'Use indexer for scanning' then click Refresh



Launch Fences, click the Purchase button, then click Enter Product Key to enter your licence key

What do I do with my Fences licence key?

Q I liked the sound of Fences (www.snipca.com/55084) after you recommended it in Issue 712 (page 19). I used the free trial then paid for a £9.99 subscription. I now have a licence key, but I don't know what to do with it. Fences' developer Stardock hasn't responded to my requests for help. Maybe you can do better?

Peter Buckley

A To activate your licence key, launch Fences from the Windows Start menu – you'll see the 'Welcome to Fences' window. In the bottom right, click the Purchase button (1 in our screenshot above), then click Enter Product Key 2. Paste or type your key into the Product Key box that appears, enter your email below, then click Activate.

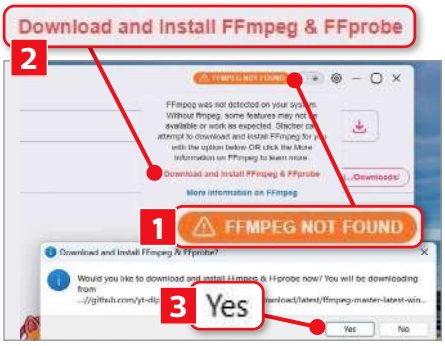
Why doesn't the latest version of Stacher work?

Q In Issue 712's Cover Feature ('Watch TV anywhere') you recommended Stacher (www.snipca.com/55015) as a way of downloading videos to your laptop. But I find that the latest version (7) no longer works. Is this anything to do with FFmpeg? I think this should be installed automatically and I see it is on my computer in various places, but I haven't seen a ZIP file.

E Nott

A FFmpeg (the codecs needed for the program to work) are not added to your system automatically when you install Stacher. You should see a 'FFmpeg not found' warning in the top-right of the Stacher window when you launch it (1 in our screenshot below). If so, click this, select 'Download and Install FFmpeg and FFprobe' 2, then click Yes 3.

If you don't see the 'FFmpeg not found' warning, download FFmpeg manually from www.snipca.com/55513 and extract the ZIP file. Now launch Stacher, click Tools and select 'Open Stacher Home Directory'. Copy the 'ffmpeg.exe' file from your extracted ZIP to the Stacher home directory, then restart Stacher.



To install FFmpeg in Stacher, click 'FFmpeg not found' then 'Download and Install FFmpeg and FFprobe'

Jargon Buster

1080p High-definition video: 1920x1080 pixels.

3G/4G/5G Technologies that deliver faster mobile broadband.

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

Benchmarking Comparing products with an accepted standard.

Beta A version of software that's being tested.

Bitrate A measure of data transfer speed.

BIOS Software built into every PC that connects the vital components.

Bitcoin A digital currency, not controlled by governments, that can be used to send money to individuals.

Bootable Describes a device or disc with system files on it so it can be used to start up your computer.

Browser engine Turns website code into pages you can interact with.

Buffering Downloading a certain amount of data before starting to play a video.

Cache A temporary space for storing information.

Chatbot An AI program designed to recreate conversation with humans.

Codec A file that tells a PC how to record or play a type of media file.

Cookie A small text file stored on your computer by a website.

Copilot+ An enhanced version of Microsoft's Copilot AI tool.

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

CPU Another term for a PC processor.

DisplayPort A socket for connecting monitors.

Distro A version of the Linux OS and the programs that go with it.

DLNA A technology that enables TVs, network media players and NAS devices to communicate with each other and display media files.

DOCX The default file format used by Word 2007 and later.

Dolby Atmos Surround-sound technology that adds 'height' to the audio through speakers built into the top of devices.

dpi Dots per inch. A measure of printed image quality, or the size an object will be shown on screen.

Driver A file that tells Windows how to work with an external device.

E Ink A special ink used to display content in electronic devices.

End-to-end encryption A way of encrypting messages so that the only people who can read them are the sender and recipient

eSIM A virtual SIM card that's built into a phone.

Ethernet A standard used for almost all wired computer networks.

EXE A program file designed to run in Windows.

exFAT Microsoft's file system for USB sticks and SD cards.

Factory reset Restoring a device to the manufacturer's default settings.

FAT32 An old system used for formatting hard drives.

Favicon A small icon for a website, usually appearing in the address and bookmark bars of a browser.

FFmpeg Free tool that converts, records, streams and edits video and audio. Runs from the command line on most systems.

File path Shows the location of a file within Windows.

Firmware Basic software stored on hardware to control its operation.

Fps Frames per second. Used to indicate gaming performance.

Frame rate The number of still images, or frames, shown per second to create a moving image.

GHz Gigahertz. A measure of how many instructions a chip can process per second.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

Hardware acceleration Using a graphics card to radically improve video and games performance.

HDMI A type of connection that transmits high-definition video and audio signals.

Hex colour A six-character code representing a colour. Used by web designers.

HSL Colour model based on hue, saturation and lightness. Used in design and coding to define and adjust colours more clearly.

Hyperlink A clickable link that takes you to a new document or website.

Hz Hertz. Measures the frequency something happens: 1Hz equals once a second.

IMAP A method for email that lets the user manage messages stored on a remote server.

IP address A unique set of numbers used to identify computers and websites on the internet.

ISO file A type of image file that contains data from a CD or DVD.

LAN A computer network in one place, such as a home or office.

LLM Large language model. A type of artificial intelligence algorithm that analyses huge amounts of data sets to summarise and create content.

LTE Short for 3GPP Long Term Evolution. A standard for fast transfer of data on mobile networks.

Macro An automated series of commands or options that can be run at any time.

Manifest V3 Third version of the software that runs Chrome browser extensions.

Mesh Wi-Fi Wireless network system that uses multiple, connected routers to stretch Wi-Fi.

Metadata A set of data that gives information about a file.

MicroSD card A small type of memory card.

MicroUSB A miniature version of USB, often found on smartphones.

MVNO A mobile provider that piggybacks on another network rather than its own.

NAS A hard drive attached to a network that can be shared with other PCs.

NTFS A file system used by all recent versions of Windows.

OCR The process by which printed text is scanned and converted into documents that can be edited.

OLED A thin-film light-emitting diode used in PC and TV screens.

Open source Software that can be modified by anyone.

OpenPGP Encryption used mostly for emails to ensure only the recipient of the message can read it.

Optical resolution The true amount of detail a scanner can 'see' as it passes across a document.

Package manager A program that helps automate the process of installing, updating, configuring, and removing software packages.

Partition A large hard drive can be split into two or more partitions.

Passkey A method for signing into accounts by typing a one-off code, fingerprint or facial recognition.

Plain text Text in a document that doesn't contain any formatting.

POP3 A system for remotely accessing and retrieving email from an ISP.

PUA A program that may not be desired, despite the user consenting to it being downloaded.

PVR Set-top boxes that let you pause and record digital TV.

QR code A barcode that can be read using smartphones.

RAM Used for data storage while the PC is switched on.

RAW A format for digital photos that stores the image exactly as the camera captured it.

Recovery mode A part of Windows that appears when you can't boot your PC, offering repair tools.

Refresh rate Measured in Hertz (Hz), the number of times per second that the image on your monitor is redrawn.

RGB image A colour picture created on a monitor, by combining a value for red, green and blue channels.

RJ-11 A type of small plug and socket used by modems to connect to a telephone socket.

Roaming charge Fee incurred for using your phone to receive data through overseas mobile networks.

Rootkit Software that gives a hacker access to a computer.

Sandbox A virtual container that you can run programs in safely.

SD card Secure Digital card. A popular type of memory card.

Secure Boot A security standard designed to make sure your PC avoids malware when booting.

Security key A USB device that locks and unlocks your computer.

SIM The smart card used by all digital mobile phones.

SSD Storage that, unlike a hard drive, uses no moving parts.

Stop Code Error code Windows shows when it crashes (Blue/Black Screen). Helps identify what caused the crash, like hardware or driver faults.

System restore point Collection of system files stored on a given date and time to which Windows can revert if a problem occurs.

Temporary file Created by sites and software to store info for a specific purpose.

Throttle Intentionally slowing broadband speeds to manage congestion on a network.

Two-factor authentication A system that uses two different means to identify the user.

UEFI A modern replacement for the BIOS.

UPnP A standard for sharing media between computers and network devices.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1/3.2/4.0 Faster successors to USB.

USB-A The original type of USB connector, released in 1996.

USB-C A connector that's reversible.

VBA Editor for writing Visual Basic for Applications code, mainly in Microsoft Office.

Virtual machine A software-based computer running inside another computer.

Virus definitions A database of known viruses.

Visual C++ Microsoft's tool for writing C++, a powerful programming language used to build fast, complex software.

Waveform An image that represents an audio signal or recording.

Widget A small program that runs on the Windows desktop.

Write speed How long it takes a hard drive to save data.

XLSX The default file format for Microsoft Excel since version 2007.

XML A versatile type of document that can store various types of information.

Zero-day vulnerability A previously unknown software flaw that can be exploited by malware or hackers.

ZIP file A file that contains compressed documents or files.

Broadband Deals

	Provider	Package Name	Monthly Price	Contract Length	Broadband Speed	Reward*	First-year Cost*
1		5G Hub	£17.00 £19 from 1st April 2026	24 Months	150Mbps avg. speed	N/A	CHEAPEST £212
2	 Gigafast Full Fibre	500 Full Fibre	£27.00	12 Months	500Mbps avg. speed	N/A	£324
3		Be1000	£32.00	18 Months	900Mbps avg. speed	£30 Gift Card	£354
4		C-900	£38.00 £41 from 1st April 2026	24 Months	900Mbps avg. speed	N/A	£468

*Payments based on 12x monthly cost (including price rise) minus reward value.

*Reward subject to change. Available as of 31st July 2025.

Easy when you

Know How

Worried his phone's battery will run out when he's away from home, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Charge his phone using the sun

I suffer from a condition known as 'low-battery anxiety' – "a quirky side effect of our tech-reliant world" according to ChatGPT. When I'm out and about, I compulsively check the charge level on my phone, and fret that even having battery-saver mode enabled won't get me through the day.

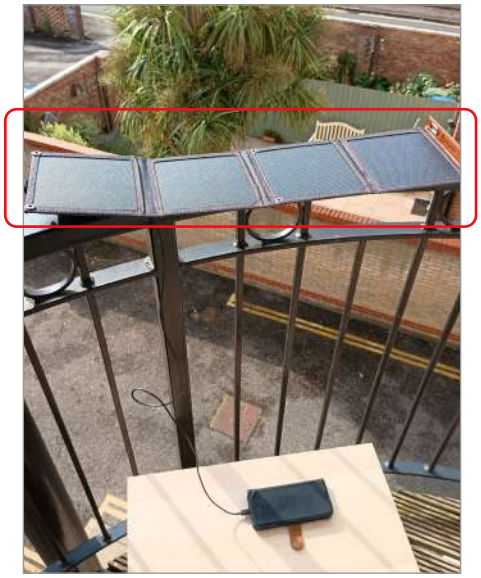
> In two hours my phone battery rose from 58 to 77 per cent

It's a silly worry, really, because power outlets are everywhere these days – from mains sockets in coffee shops and pubs to USB charging points on buses and trains. Where you don't get them, however, is in a park, on a beach, on a country walk and in other places one might venture on a summer's day.

With the warm weather encouraging me to go out more than usual, my low-battery anxiety kicked in. What if my phone ran out of juice in the middle of nowhere, leaving me unable to call or WhatsApp anyone (assuming I could get a mobile signal)?

To address this dilemma, I decided to buy a portable solar charger for my phone. This would potentially provide me with power when no socket was within reach – as long as it was sunny enough.

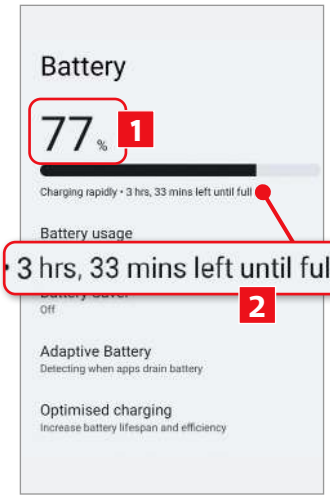
As is my wont, I ordered the cheapest one I could find on Amazon, from an obscure brand called Norwill, for a mere £9.99 (www.snipca.com/55548). This came with a warning that I "shouldn't have high expectations", which was borne out by its failure to deliver even a smidgen of solar power.



Robert placed the solar charger on his balcony for maximum sun exposure

Next, I tried a Vikeri solar power bank (www.snipca.com/55663), which cost £27 and had a 4.7 rating on Amazon. This arrived fully charged, so I ran down the power and placed it on my sunlit balcony to replenish its juice (it can also be charged from the mains, but that would be cheating).

Sadly, the replenishment never happened, and after a full day of moving it around in line with the sun, it hadn't recharged at all. This was disappointing, because I liked its built-in torch and compass. Back to Amazon it went for a full refund.



After two hours the charge level increased from 57 to 77 per cent

I then realised I should probably do some research into solar chargers before wasting money on another defective device. I discovered a brand called BigBlue (www.snipca.com/55665), which regularly rates highly in independent comparisons, and is regarded as a market leader in portable solar-powered technology.

I bought a 14W BigBlue charger from Amazon for £39.59 (www.snipca.com/55666) – reduced to £33.65 with a 15 per cent voucher (this may no longer be available). It came with a USB cable, two clips for attaching it to a rucksack and very simple instructions.

The charger itself is like a large wallet (measuring 6.1x15.2x5.4 cm), with four fold-out solar panels and a USB adapter. I connected my phone and placed the BigBlue on my balcony to catch the morning sun. Initially, I stuck it on the rail (pictured above left) before moving it to a safer position on a small table.

Unlike the other chargers, my phone instantly detected a power source and showed the charging symbol, along with a 'Charging rapidly' message. After only an hour, its charge level had increased from 58 per cent to 67 per cent, and at two hours – despite a few clouds – it hit 77 per cent (1 in screenshot), with 3 hours and 33 minutes left until full 2. This was very impressive, especially compared with the previous two duds, and within five hours my phone was fully charged – faster than predicted.

The BigBlue is lightweight, waterproof and easy to slip into your jacket or bag when folded – or attach to it using the supplied buckles. It's certainly reduced my low-battery anxiety, and though it obviously works best in direct sunlight, I won't be venturing far when the weather's foggy and grey.

Need help with charging your devices using solar energy? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to use ChatGPT on his TV

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